RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Malice in Wonderland

Nicholas Blake

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About the Book

Private detective Nigel Strangeways receives a call for help from Wonderland, a new holiday camp that has recently opened only to be plagued by a series of cruel practical jokes conducted by someone calling themselves ‘The Mad Hatter’.

The camp’s owners are convinced a rival firm, desperate to put them out of business, is behind the events. Or could it be a disgruntled employee, or even one of the four hundred guests currently staying at the camp? As the pranks become increasingly dangerous and tensions rise, Nigel must do all he can to uncover the Mad Hatter’s true identity – before it’s too late.

About the Author

Nicholas Blake was the pseudonym of Poet Laureate Cecil Day-Lewis, who was born in County Laois, Ireland, in 1904. After his mother died in 1906, he was brought up in London by his father, spending summer holidays with relatives in Wexford. He was educated at Sherborne School and Wadham College, Oxford, from which he graduated in 1927. Blake initially worked as a teacher to supplement his income from his poetry writing and he published his first Nigel Strangeways novel, *A Question of Proof*, in 1935. Blake went on to write a further nineteen crime novels, all but four of which featured Nigel Strangeways, as well as numerous poetry collections and translations.

During the Second World War he worked as a publications editor in the Ministry of Information, which he used as the basis for the Ministry of Morale in *Minute for Murder*, and after the war he joined the publishers Chatto & Windus as an editor and director. He was appointed Poet Laureate in 1968 and died in 1972 at the home of his friend, the writer Kingsley Amis.

Also by Nicholas Blake

A Question of Proof
Thou Shell of Death
There's Trouble Brewing
The Beast Must Die
The Widow's Cruise
The Case of the Abominable Snowman
The Smiler with the Knife
Minute for Murder
Head of a Traveller
The Dreadful Hollow
The Whisper in the Gloom
End of Chapter
The Worm of Death
The Sad Variety
The Morning After Death

NICHOLAS BLAKE

Malice in Wonderland

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART I

Mr. Perry Observes

I

YOUNG MR. PERRY was going to camp. Not a Territorial camp, nor a Scout camp, nor yet a Concentration camp. No, a very different lay-out indeed; a camp which would have made any nomad tribesman rub his eyes in amazement and take to his heels; one, Mr. Perry hoped, that would provide lavish material for the note-books which weighed down the suitcase in the rack over his head.

With mild approval young Mr. Perry eyed the factories that flashed past into the wake of the train. Factories were permissible, to be encouraged even. Temples of the Machine. Mr. Perry, who had never worked at bench or conveyor-belt, was all for the Machine. Of course, there were factories and factories. One did not altogether allow those factories of an earlier day, ramshackle, all bits and pieces, leaking steam from every joint like superannuated dragons, standing amidst a desolation of rank grass, rusty boilers, discarded equipment, which studded the countryside where Mr. Perry had been brought up. Those gothic survivals of laissez-faire and individualist rapacity had served their purpose. History, as Mr. Perry put it to himself, had passed them by. There might be a certain romantic aspect in their decay; but, with all deference to the early Auden, whose weakness for rusting metal and escaping steam was a notorious instance of the foibles of genius, one must insist that such romanticism would not do.

Mr. Perry, for his part, upheld the neo-classicism. He liked things to look prosperous and ship-shape. That factory over there, for instance, standing by itself amid green fields, white, spruce and functional as a gun-boat on the Chinese station —his heart warmed to it, particularly when it was shown to have been the last outpost of civilisation. For now the train had entered pure countryside, and for Mr. Perry the country was not so much lamentable as non-existent. People lived there, no doubt, for strange reasons of their own; but they were not people in the sense he understood the word: they were not crowds; and Mr. Perry quite genuinely felt at home only in a crowd—apart from the fact that crowds were, so to speak, his business.

Averting his eyes from this barren spectacle of cows, barns and orchards, he turned to the proper study of mankind, his fellow-passengers. There were three of them in the compartment, a family party. An elderly woman, gazing placidly out at the scenery: a blonde, her daughter, who was lapping up *Film Frolics*: and the paterfamilias. The latter was certainly, for Mr. Perry, the show piece. A man of preternatural fatness, whose belly dwarfed even the *Times* newspaper that half covered it, his face a mass of folds and creases, his clothes miraculously uncreased. He wore a black cutaway coat, decorously striped trousers, and an old-fashioned cravat. His face, huge and grave, resembled that of a bloodhound afflicted with an excess of thyroid. He might have sat as model for the caricature of a Capitalist in a Bolshie newspaper.

The man caught Mr. Perry's eye, laid down his copy of the *Times* very deliberately, and, with an unobtrusive, cathedral sort of gesture towards the green, printed label on Mr. Perry's suitcase, said:

"I perceive that you too, sir, are going to Wonderland."

At this moment the train took its cue and, like Alice, plunged into a tunnel. The clattering din precluded conversation, so that Mr. Perry was free to analyse the tones

in which that monumental figure had addressed him. They had been solemn and portentous as those of a whole Dean and Chapter discussing the question of grouting the East tower: at the same time there was something behind them—not quite servility, but the smooth, professional respectfulness of the upper servant. Perhaps he is somebody's butler, thought Mr. Perry; but it's rather surprising that a butler should be going to Wonderland, and in those Throgmorton Street clothes; and one doesn't somehow associate butlers with cute blonde daughters. Still, there's no law of nature against butlers reproducing the species.

The train burst out into the dazzling sunlight again.

"You are to be with us for some time, sir?" inquired the man.

"A fortnight, probably. It depends——" Mr. Perry broke off, not wishing to say that it depended on how long his work would take. People did not normally go to Wonderland to work.

"In that case, if you will permit the liberty——"

Mr. Perry glanced at the visiting-card the man tendered him. "*Mr. James Thistlethwaite*, 29 *St. Petrock's Street, Oxford*," it stated non-committally.

"And this is Mrs. Thistlethwaite," the man continued, with the voice of a head verger pointing out the figures in a twelfth-century stained-glass window. "And my daughter, Sally."

Sally Thistlethwaite glanced up from a photograph of Robert Taylor, nodded coolly, and occupied herself with *Film Frolics* again. It was the kind of look Mr. Perry was quite used to getting from blondes in tobacco kiosks: a large Players and that will be all, it stated in unequivocal terms. But to-day, for no apparent reason, it irked him to be dismissed with one glance. He replied, more aggressively than was his habit:

"My dossier is as follows: Name, Paul Perry. Age, twenty-five. Unmarried. Educated, St. Bees, and Peterhouse, Cambridge."

Sally glanced up at him again, slightly puzzled. Her father, however, did not appear discomposed by Paul's abruptness. He nodded benignly.

"A University man. Quite so. The stamp is unmistakable. Even at Cambridge. And your occupation, sir? No," he wheezed, holding up a fat hand, "don't tell me. Let me see, now." He measured Paul with a grave, curiously alert eye.

"Mr. Thistlethwaite is a great judge of character," said his wife comfortably. "You mustn't mind him."

"Grey flannel trousers, good quality cloth, not kept in a press, though, I fear. Shirt with collar attached. Sports jacket, ready-made," murmured the fat man, as if communing with himself. Paul Perry blushed and, catching a subdued merriment in Sally's eye, blushed more angrily still.

"The normal working attire of the schoolmaster," continued Mr. Thistlethwaite. "But I observe the elbows are not unduly worn, though the jacket has seen considerable wear. No sitting at a desk, we may deduce: therefore not a schoolmaster. A journalist, perhaps. The pencils in the breast pocket. Bulge in right-hand side pocket. Might be a reporter's note-book. I——"

"You're embarrassing the gentleman, Daddy. Isn't he, my pet?" exclaimed the girl Sally.

"Not in the least," said Paul stiffly. "As it happens, I'm a scientist. A scientist of a sort, that is."

"What sort. D'you carve up guinea-pigs, my pet?"

"Sally, you should not call strange gentlemen your pet in a railway carriage," protested Mrs. Thistlethwaite unconvincingly. "Please forgive her, Mr. Er. She's that

impulsive."

"Not at all," Mr. Perry said. "I'm a field-worker, as a matter of fact."

Sally opened her eyes wide. They were remarkably pretty eyes. "A field-worker," she said. "Oo-er. Artificial manures, I suppose. Well, everyone to his taste."

"Sally, that will be enough," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "The scientist is the benefactor of humanity. Several of my gentlemen have chosen that walk of like. Artificial manures are of incalculable service to the agriculturist, and the land to-day is——"

"But I've nothing to do with artificial manures," exclaimed Paul a little desperately. "Why you should think …" His voice tailed off, for he became aware of Mr. Thistlethwaite's eye fixed, with a somewhat censorious expression, upon his neck.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Haven't I washed my neck this morning?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite raised a shocked hand. "Please, sir. Please. No, I was referring to the lapel. Just a leetle too broad, wouldn't you say, sir? A trifle outré? Where, if I may make so bold, did you purchase the garment?"

"In Cambridge. Why?"

"Ah, I thought so. Well, youth may perhaps be permitted a little excess, a certain rodomontade of attire, if I may so express myself. The garment does not become you ill, sir. Though, as I always tell my own gentlemen, a gentleman should wear a suit if he wishes to look distinguished in the quadrangle."

"You're connected with the university?" asked Paul, who had now decided that his vis-à-vis must be a college servant.

"We have that honour, sir. For the last hundred and fifty years we have had that honour."

"Indeed? A hundred and fifty years? You'll be thinking of retiring soon, I suppose?" replied Paul, bemused by the apparently royal use of the "we."

"I allude to my firm," said Mr. Thistlethwaite with dignity.

Sally glanced up, giggling pleasantly. "Come off it, Daddy. Mr. Perry's just itching to know what it's all about. Daddy keeps a shop," she exclaimed.

An expression of horror convulsed her father's huge face at this meiosis. "A shop! My dear! Please! An establishment."

"I've got it," said Paul. "You're a tailor."

"A master tailor," amended Mr. Thistlethwaite, recovering his poise. "Very sharp of you, sir. It is easy to see that you are a scientist. Observation and analysis. I myself, in my amateur way, am a dabbler in science. Criminology to be specific." He whipped out a luridly-covered book from behind his back. It was entitled *The Body in the Bassinet*. "A very pretty little problem. It was recommended to me by one of my late gentlemen—no less a person that Lord Hugh Willoughby."

"Good gracious, do you read that sort of stuff? Why?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite directed an overwhelming Johnsonian gaze upon Paul. "I read them, sir, because I take pleasure in them. Intellectual pleasure, sir."

"Mr. Perry's a high-brow, I expect," said Sally, very much up in arms. "Spends all his time reading about phosphates."

"My good girl," retorted Paul, "a high-brow is only a person with a heightened awareness of life. The infant, when he first uses his fingers to grasp an orange and transfer it to his mouth, is a high-brow. The——"

"Do we pay at the door, professor, or will you be sending round a plate?"

Paul gave her a look. It was no good, though; the young woman was quite impossible. Pert, semi-educated, low intelligence quotient. A type interesting enough

objectively as a subject of research, but its individual members of no importance. Mr. Perry docketed her in his mind and pushed the file well out of sight, unaware that—like her father—Sally was no type, but a genuine original character. Indeed, Mr. Perry did not really hold with "characters"; they had a habit of upsetting both one's equanimity and one's statistics.

"This is your first visit to Wonderland?" Mr. Thistlethwaite was inquiring.

"Yes."

"I hope it may come up to your expectations. Mrs. Thistlethwaite and I spent a very pleasant fortnight there last year. I myself," he added coyly, "had the satisfaction of winning the Beetle Drive."

"Indeed? You astonish me."

"Every taste in recreation is catered for. You yourself, sir, are perhaps a cricketer?"

"No. No, I'm not."

"Never mind," Sally interposed darkly. "There'll probably be a knock-knees competition."

Paul turned, in a marked manner, to his *New Statesman*. After a while, the train was climbing and twisting through a landscape of small green hills, pastures and unkempt hedgerows. At the junction they got out and boarded another, smaller train, which puffed cheerfully towards Wonderland. Paul was thinking of the task ahead of him. If he carried it out successfully, the Chief might find him a permanent place in the organisation. But it was nearly all voluntary work, and the legacy his aunt had left him would not last much longer. He began to run over in his mind the system on which he would work: it depended in the last resort, of course, upon the local conditions, but there was no harm in having the general line of activity plotted out …

The train halted abruptly at a small station in a deep combe. They all got out. Mr. Thistlethwaite, taking Paul by the arm, led him aside and whispered coyly:

"If you will be so good, sir—do not mention the nature of my profession when we get there. I am holidaying incognito, so to say. In Wonderland we have no class distinctions, of course; but it will preclude any possibility of embarrassment on the part of some of our fellow-visitors, if they remain unaware of my—how shall I put it?—more fortunate social status. Let us enter as equals this true democracy of holiday-makers."

The extraordinary man bowed gravely, removed a speck of fluff from Paul's collar, and waddled off towards the station yard, where a bright green bus, with *Wonderland* written on its side, awaited them. An attendant, dressed in bright green livery, was piling the luggage on top of the bus. Paul, who had lingered outside to study his fellow-visitors, finally entered the bus and secured the last available seat. At this moment, Sally Thistlethwaite walked down the gangway and stopped beside him.

"Rush hour," she said.

Paul indicated, with rather ill grace, that she could have his seat.

"I wouldn't disturb you for worlds," she said. Then, with a mischievous curl of her lip: "I'll sit on your lap, my pet."

"I would prefer to stand," retorted young Mr. Perry coldly.

"Oh, well, have it your own way. It's not every day you have a pretty girl asking to sit on your knee, though, I bet."

Paul moved forward, took up his stand where he could see ahead through the glass partition at the front of the bus. They careered along narrow lanes, past farms

sheltered under the lee of the hills, then climbed a steep gradient till they attained a hilltop from which a great panorama of cliff and sea spread out. The line of cliffs, curving in from the distance, was golden from the evening sun: the inshore sea held the purple bloom of grapes. But it was not at sea or cliffs that young Mr. Perry was gazing with such satisfaction and excitement. His eyes were attracted by the huge white streamer, *Welcome to Wonderland*, that made an archway for the bus, and the spectacle of Wonderland itself displayed down there along the cliff-top between the hill and the sea.

II

THE CORE AND centre-piece of Wonderland was a huge white building, modernist in design, flat-roofed. Its walls seemed to be made of glass, so great was the extent of its windows, and this gave the severe lines a not ungraceful look of insubstantiality, as though at any moment it might open great white wings and float off into the summer blue. The side which faced the sea curved in a semi-circle, so that it commanded a wide prospect to south, west and east. A balcony overhung from the top storey on this side, curving like the bridge of a liner: it was, in fact, called "The Captain's Bridge" by the habitués of Wonderland.

Young Mr. Perry gazed his fill upon this edifice, and found it good. Good, not only for its hygienic-factory lines, but because of what it stood for. It stood for Organised Recreation, with the accent on the "organised": and anything that was efficiently organised was O.K. by Paul Perry. Within that massive fun-factory (so a careful study of the brochure issued by Wonderland Ltd. Holiday Camp had informed him) were vast dining-halls where ravenous visitors could partake of epicurean meals cooked by London chefs in hygienic kitchens and served on spotless napery by cheerful waitresses to the accompaniment of a string band: there was also a ballroom, whose sprung maple floor positively incited you to the light fantastic; to say nothing of bars, an indoor swimming-bath equipped with Aerofilter and coloured fountains, a concert hall, a gymnasium, and innumerable playrooms.

The general impression derived from this brochure was that, if you could not enjoy yourself at Wonderland, you were past praying for. And Wonderland was evidently determined to make you enjoy yourself there, even if you had to perish from a surfeit of recreation in the process. As the bus drew to a standstill outside the main building, several men and women approached it, smiling hospitably but purposefully. The men wore green sweaters with a white letter W upon them, and white flannel trousers ; the women, green jerseys and short white skirts. In a moment each of the new batch of visitors had a numbered green disc pinned on him, and they were led off in groups to the chalets where they would be sleeping.

The Thistlethwaite family were evidently going to be near neighbours of Paul. As he trailed along behind them, he heard Sally say to her mother, in a voice—for her—strangely subdued.

"Did you see Rip Van Winkle up there?"

"Rip Van——? No, dear."

"In that copse, beside the road, just before the bus turned into the grounds. He shook his fist at me. Darling, he really did look rather awful. Just his head was showing, above a bush. He had a long grey beard. I thought it was part of the bush at first."

"What you need is a nice, hot drink, my love. Why, you're trembling. You haven't caught a chill, have you?"

"But, Mummy, I *saw* him. He seemed to be looking straight into my eyes as we passed by. And he shook his fist at me."

"We must tell your father about it," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite. "He'll see that it doesn't happen again. It was just a tramp, I expect."

Paul Perry, who was looking with interest at the row of chalets, green-painted and pleasantly set amidst groups of trees, only gave half an ear to this conversation.

He was to be reminded of it, however, before long, and in a disagreeable manner.

For the present, he was occupied by the sensation, part bewilderment, part timidity, which comes over any but the stoutest spirit when he is about to enter a community of unknown people, himself unknown to them. It was like the first day at a public school, thought Paul. This impression was heightened by the athletic attire of the professional hosts and hostesses, and the groups of young people who were strolling about everywhere, laughing among themselves, so plainly knowing the ropes—five hundred of them the place could accommodate, for Wonderland was the biggest, brightest, most ambitious of all the holiday camps that had sprung up over England during the last year or two.

Paul closed the door of his chalet, and unpacked with the forlorn gloom of a new boy on the first day of term arranging his few possessions in his locker. The luxuriant Sleepeesi mattress wooing the tired reveller into the arms of Morpheus, the water (H. and C.), the electric light, hanging wardrobe and 100% damp-proof walls—all extolled in the Wonderland Ltd. brochure—failed to drive away Paul's blues. Luxury, indeed, though he approved of it on principle provided it was put within the reach of the masses, had a certain disquieting effect upon him. He was not for nothing the son of an Evangelical minister, brought up in a harsh, poverty-stricken north-country town.

"Mr. Perry? Good. Settling in all right?"

The young man who had knocked at the chalet door was tall broad, and tanned a gorgeous mahogany, like an advertisement out of *Esquire*.

"I'm the games organiser," he added. "Name of Wise. My step-brother's the resident manager."

"Edward Wise? The rugger blue?"

"Yes. I used to play a bit," said the gorgeous young man, with what seemed to Paul the most offensive false modesty.

"You were up at Cambridge just before me, then. And your brother's the manager? All one big, happy family here."

"We aim to give you a home from home, set in sylvan surroundings beside the sparkling waves. See our brochure."

"You've certainly got a nice little place here."

"Not too dusty. Well, I suppose you'll be clocking in at the Reception. Eight pip-emma. Hallo," said Mr. Wise, noticing Paul's note-books which were piled on the chest of drawers. "You an author? I say, not so bad. Never met a live author before. Down here for local colour?"

"Something of the sort," replied Paul mendaciously. He was not unmoved by the evident respect which had come into the athlete's voice. His pleasure was short-lived. Edward Wise, who had moved to the door, exclaimed:

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! If it isn't our Sal! Back amongst the hectic pleasure-seekers again, Sally?"

"How are you, Teddy?"

"Full of oats, midear, full of oats. I say, you're in distinguished company. Celebrated author in our midst. Name of Perry. You'll have to watch your step, midear."

"Perry?" Paul could hear her saying. "But that's the man we travelled down on the train with. He said he was a scientist."

"Ah. Pulling your leg. Mystery man."

"Well, I don't know. He's a high-brow, anyway——"

"Moderate the voice, Sally. The gentleman's just down this street."

“I say, Teddy, talking of mystery men, have you seen an old guy with a beard a mile long in the wood up there?”

“Beard? Oh, that must be old Ishmael. Sort of hermit idea. Quite harmless, but he doesn’t like us very much. Wasn’t in residence last time you came, I believe. He——”

Paul could not follow the rest of this interesting conversation, for the two moved away out of earshot. The girl had quite a pleasing voice, he reflected: deep, liquid, faintly countrified in accent. Pity she had nothing in her head. Edward Wise he dismissed as the normal, hearty type: common as blackberries at Cambridge: potentially, no doubt, the Enemy—but with a little diplomacy you could get them eating out of your hand. He wondered what Wise did in the winter months when the camp was closed, and jotted down a memo. in the note-book marked Q (for Queries).

Presently, taking off his tie and turning his shirt-collar down over his coat (“protective colouring” was the way he put it to himself), Paul wandered out to take the air before dinner. A huge figure, resplendent in white drill suit, Panama hat, and what appeared to be an M.C.C. tie, bore down upon him.

“Salubrious air, sir,” boomed Mr. Thistlethwaite. “Putting colour in those cheeks already. May we have the honour of including you at our table, sir? Very congenial company you will find it, I venture to say. Interesting material, too, for a gentleman of the pen. Ah, yes,” he continued, silencing Paul’s protest with a roguish finger. “My daughter told me. Have no fear, sir. Like myself, you prefer to be incognito. Very natural. Very proper. A chiel amang us taking notes.”

Paul had no very keen desire for Mr. Thistlethwaite as a permanent mess-mate during his stay at Wonderland: but the prospect of sitting down to table with a number of total strangers, though professionally suitable enough, intimidated him more than he would have cared to say. Paul Perry was still pretty new to his job. So he accepted Mr. Thistlethwaite’s offer, and together they strolled towards the great white building from which the sound of a deep gong reverberated.

“‘The clamorous harbinger of victuals,’” quoted Mr. Thistlethwaite. “You will find the table modest, sir, but not unpalatable. They keep a very tolerable cellar. I fancy we might broach a bottle to launch our—ah—pleasure cruise.…”

“I can’t think how they do it on £3 10s. a week,” Paul was saying twenty minutes later to his left-hand neighbour, a small, tubby, beaming man with gold-rimmed pince-nez. They had eaten through two excellent courses, and there was still Crême brulé, cheese and coffee to come.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” replied the small man. “Organisation, of course. Mind you, they put on specially good grub for the Saturday dinner, because newcomers generally turn up to-day. But £3 10s. inclusive of everything—all the fun of the fair, as you might say—that’s good going.” He blinked rapidly several times, then murmured to Paul out of the corner of his mouth, with an absurd air of self-importance, “Shouldn’t be surprised if they aren’t losing money over it. I’m told they’re out to knock out Beale Bay—that’s the holiday camp farther down the coast. Competition’s pretty fierce, you can bet. If we saw the balance sheet, we’d find the Wonderland people had cut profits down to the bone, anyway.”

“Well, that’s their look-out, isn’t it? Lowers the cost of luxury for us poor holiday-makers, so we won’t complain.”

“What? Yes, oh yes, I see what you mean,” said the small man. He had an anxious way of listening to you, Paul noticed—head slightly on one side, eyes peering up through the pince-nez—as though what you said might contain some clue that would turn out a matter of life and death for him.

“Mind you,” he went on, lowering his voice again, “the cheap tariff here—well, it

means that you get rather a mixed crowd. At Bognor, now——"

"Sir," interrupted Mr. Thistlethwaite, who had overheard this sentiment, "do you suggest that the amenities of civilisation should not be open to all alike, from the highest in the land to the humblest?"

"Oh, indeed no, I certainly didn't. I——"

"You will concur with me, as a" —here Mr. Thistlethwaite winked ponderously at Paul—"as a scientist, Mr. Perry, that science should benefit all equally."

"It would be nice if it did."

"Quite so. Your sentiments, Mr. Morley, were illiberal, to say the least."

"Now, Daddy, you mustn't bully Albert," said Sally. "Albert, my pet, don't listen to him. He's just practising speeches for when he's a town councillor."

Albert Morley gave Sally a look of almost dog-like gratitude. She smiled back at him kindly. She had dark eyebrows and eyelashes, Paul noticed for the first time: they gave a certain vivacity, he admitted, to a blonde type which would otherwise be quite conventional and insipid. Catching his glance, she said to him coolly:

"*As a scientist*, Mr. Perry, you must think us a very low-brow, dull lot here. Funny place for *you* to come for a holiday."

"A scientist is always on the look-out for specimens," Paul replied, giving back her haughty gaze with interest. If she was determined to make unprovoked war on him, war she should have.

"The back-chat king," said Sally, turning her shoulder upon him.

Paul looked round the tables at what Mr. Morley had called "a mixed crowd." Young people, for the most part. From the £150 to the £300 income groups, he imagined: that could be verified later by taking a cross-section. Quite a number of older men and women, though: brought their children, no doubt: the children had a special supper at 6. Many of the girls wore evening frocks, in readiness for the dancing. Flannel suits predominated among the males: the faces, like the suits, were spruce, showy, cut to a pattern. There was no doubt that the visitors were enjoying themselves: far more animation than you would get at a seaside boarding-house, thought Paul, remembering with a shudder those boyhood holidays in grim *pensions* at Scarborough or Skegness.

Two sides of this restaurant were occupied by glass windows almost from floor to ceiling: the other walls looked like unstained oak, but were probably faked pitch-pine. The chairs were imitation Spanish style, quite well padded. Flowers and electric-light standards decorated the tables, which seated anything from two to a dozen people. Some of the visitors, Paul noticed, seemed a little subdued by the unusual luxury of their surroundings: these, no doubt, were new arrivals who had never been to such a camp before. On the whole, though, it was evident that they took to what Mr. Thistlethwaite called "the amenities of civilisation" like ducks to water. He wanted to ask someone whether this short, annual brush with "the amenities" dissatisfied people with the drabness of their own homes; but he feared lest the question might bring down on his head some crushing, Johnsonian rebuke from Mr. Thistlethwaite who, under the influence of good wine and the holiday spirit, was growing more democratic every minute.

Yes, the Wonderland Thistlethwaite was noticeably different from the fellow-traveller of a few hours ago, just as that fellow-traveller no doubt differed markedly from the tailor of Oxford. Environment conditions personality, said Paul Perry to himself: like many of his age, he had a weakness for generalisations with a scientific smack about them.

After dinner was over, Mr. Thistlethwaite suggested that they should take the air

on “the Captain’s bridge” until it was time to enter the concert hall for the Reception ceremony. Albert Morley trotted upstairs in their wake. It was he who pointed out to Paul the sights that could be seen from the balcony, which indeed commanded a superb prospect of the sea and of the coast to east and west. With a proprietary, but faintly anxious pride, as of a father introducing his children to a rich, capricious relative, Mr. Morley called Paul’s attention to the sunset, a passing freighter, an old smugglers’ cove, the section of cliff that concealed the naval port of Applestock—their nearest town.

“I wanted to join the navy myself, when I was a nipper: but my eyesight——” said Mr. Morley, peering up into Paul’s face. “I remember my dad taking me on a steamer down the Thames. It was the August Bank Holiday of 1913—or was it 1912? —I can’t remember now. We passed the warehouses, down Limehouse way, and he told me—my dad was in the coastal trade, you see—that in the old days you could smell the spices in the warehouses right across the river. From the East, they brought them. I fancied to myself I could smell them even then. Of course, I’d wanted to be a sailor long before that, but it brought it home, somehow. I went into a shipping office. It was the next best thing, if you take my meaning.”

Mr. Morley broke off, blushing a little. Oh, hell, thought Paul. Am I going to have this little bore attached to me for the duration? He was embarrassed by this disclosure of Albert Morley’s fantasy-life, and ashamed of his embarrassment.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing to a section of the balcony that was shut off from the rest by a glass partition.

“That’s Captain Wise’s private end of the bridge. Captain Mortimer Wise. He’s the resident manager. You’ll be seeing him shortly in the concert hall, when he receives the guests. A very pleasant-spoken gentleman. Wonderful organiser.”

The resident manager. I could get a good deal of the information I want from him, thought Paul: if he’s not too busy. Should I take him into my confidence at the start? Better wait and see what he’s like.

“Time to be going below,” said Mr. Thistlethwaite, who had been standing a little apart from them on the bridge, breathing stertorously, and waving his arms in strange gestures like a lunatic signaller. “The ozone here, sir, is incomparable,” he explained. “‘Mens sana in corpore sano,’ as the Latin poet has it.”

The concert hall was already, almost full. Although this was ostensibly a reception for the new-comers, everyone was going—as Edward Wise had phrased it—to clock in. The Wonderlanders were evidently a gregarious lot. This pleased Paul, who on principle approved of mass movements, and could quote chapter and verse from certain modern authors to condemn the detached, the solitary, the bird-watcher, the secret vice of romantic isolation.

“Holds five hundred, this hall does,” whispered Albert Morley with timid pride. “You wait till the fun starts. That young Mr. Wise—he’s a card.”

Paul began to feel a trifle apprehensive. Wait till the fun starts. It sounded ominously like the initiation ceremony of a savage tribe. Not that one didn’t approve of Malinowski, and all that.

The green-and-white-clad officials of the camp now filed on to the platform amid applause, and took their seats on a crescent of chairs. The staff at prize-giving, talking among themselves, elaborately unconscious of those in the body of the hall. Now it’s the cue for the headmaster to appear. Louder applause. Captain Wise, carrying a sheaf of papers, came to the front of the platform. Considerably older than his step-brother. Smaller. The same square shape of head. The professional look, worried but infinitely capable, of the organiser. No nonsense about him.

“I won’t keep you long,” he said. “We welcome you to Wonderland. We hope you’ll all have a good time. My assistants and I are here to make sure that you have it. You’ll find a time-table of the week’s activities on the notice board in the entrance hall. I’m sure you’ll all find something to your taste there. But don’t think you’ve got to go in for any of these competitions and things if you don’t want to. We have no compulsory games at Wonderland.” (Mild applause: the public school reference is slightly above their heads, thought Paul.)

“We try to have a minimum of rules. We rely on your cooperation, and you’ve never let us down. The chief of them is, no noise in the camp after 1 a.m. The ladies need their beauty sleep.” (Laughter and protests.) “And, of course, no rowdiness. Our expert gang of chuckers-out——” (Captain Wise indicated the row of officials behind him: cheers and laughter: he’s a good psychologist, thought Paul—knows how to jolly them along, without being false-hearty.) “If you’ve any complaints, great or small, any suggestions for improving the place, bring ’em to me or one of the staff. We’re always on tap. And don’t forget to book early for next year’s visit: we’ve had to turn away over two hundred applications this summer. Well, I’ll hand you over now to the tender mercies of the games organiser. Teddy, step forward. Cheerio, everybody.”

Edward Wise took the floor. There was a perceptible stir among the female section of the audience.

“Hi-ya, boys and girls,” he cried.

“Hi-ya, Teddy,” the cry went back.

“Before we have a spot of community singing, let’s loosen up on the old war-cry. Won-der-land, hi-yi-yi. Gently at first. Gently does it. Let her go.”

The war-cry was repeated twenty times, each syllable strongly stressed, in a whisper at first, then louder and faster till it reached the hysterical pitch of the Sieg Heils at a Nazi congress.

Paul Perry was both fascinated and horrified. His fastidious soul was intensely embarrassed by the proceedings. The synthetic American accent, like a dance-band leader’s, which had replaced Edward Wise’s normal tones, the slick, confident gestures with which he conducted the war-cry—these were vastly repugnant to Paul. But, as a dispassionate observer, he could not fail to be interested; while, as one who approved of mass production on principle, he had to approve this curious, machine-like production of mass sound. And not mass sound only. Mass emotion was being stirred, the Wonderland visitors were being welded into a Wonderland community—a great pleasure-unit with a single voice. Mr. Thistlethwaite, bellowing rhythmically at his side, no longer seemed a ridiculous figure. Paul himself was soon chanting away with the best of them. When the war-cry had ended in a final clap of thunder, they all turned to each other, laughing, happy—or, as Paul would have preferred to put it, their inhibitions liquidated.

Paul, indeed, was so carried out of himself that, when Teddy Wise called for members of the audience to come forward as voluntary sports organisers, to assist the Wonderland staff, he surprised himself by being one of the first to volunteer. Sally Thistlethwaite’s sceptical glance only confirmed him in his resolution.

After half an hour of community singing, most of the guests moved over to the dance hall. As soon as the band struck up, Paul went up to Sally and her mother, and asked Mrs. Thistlethwaite for the first dance. The matron demurred, beamed with pleasure, was finally persuaded. That’ll show her, thought Paul, glancing coolly at Sally as he took her mother on to the floor. He knew he danced well.

The dance had been in progress for about an hour when a spotlight number was

put on. By tacit consent, only the best dancers took part in this. Paul had boldly asked one of the staff to partner him—a slinky brunette who turned out to be Miss Jones, the resident manager's secretary. Not more than a dozen couples were on the floor, moving to a slow fox-trot, each couple picked out in turn by the spotlight as they glided round smoothly preoccupied, like fish in some submarine grotto. Paul hoped that Sally Thistlethwaite was watching: he held Miss Jones closer as the spotlight came down on them. They seemed all alone, cut off by the sword of light from the onlookers and the other dancers. He became aware that the dancing couples had thinned out. Presently he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"This is where we get off," said Miss Jones. "Well done, partner."

"But I—why should we?"

Miss Jones explained. The band leader had been eliminating one couple after another as they passed the platform, till only the best pair of dancers was left. Paul hardly listened to her explanation. He was watching the last couple left—Sally Thistlethwaite moving like silk, like running water, in the arms of Edward Wise, the spotlight bathing them in a shaft of changing colour. Damn her, thought Paul with a viciousness that startled him. Damn them both!

It was a few seconds after this that the voice came through the loud-speakers—a strained, metallic, squeaky voice that rasped against the quiet rhythm of the band.

"*Watch out for the Mad Hatter, boys and girls*," it said.

Sally felt a slight check in Teddy Wise's step, a momentary tightening of his fingers on her wrist.

"What's all this?" she asked, as they moved to the last few bars of the music. "A new competition, or something?"

"Er, yes. Yes, that's it," replied Teddy. "A sort of crazy competition."

"Oh, do tell me all about it."

But the music came to its close with a dying clash on the cymbal, all the lights went up, and the onlookers began to applaud Teddy and Sally as they stood, blinking in the glare, smiling at each other vaguely, as if awakened from a deep sleep.

III

THE NEXT MORNING was Sunday. After breakfast, together with a considerable body of the Wonderlanders, Paul trooped down to bathe in the sea. The path took them along the cliff for a hundred yards, then zigzagged down the face of the cliff where many years ago there had been a big landslide. This now offered a declivity tangled with bushes and trees, through which glimpses of the sea below could be caught. The bathers, scrambling down this path in single file, gay in their coloured bath-robes, resembled—Paul thought—a procession of pilgrims descending towards some sea-shrine. He gave the Wonderland company full marks for not having replaced the path by concrete steps or the wilderness by formal terraces. The animation, giggling and mild horseplay, the sense of adventure, too, which this wild path aroused, fully justified their leaving it in a state of nature.

"Look out, Sally," he exclaimed suddenly to the girl, who was clambering down the path in front of him.

"What's the matter?"

"Didn't you see him? Just over there behind that bush? Old Rip Van Winkle, it was."

"Ooh!" Sally shrank back, clutching the side of his coat. "Where? I can't see anything."

"It's all right. I was only pulling your leg."

"Well, you *are* mean! It's no joke, believe me. If you'd seen him. Hey, wait a minute. Who told *you* about Rip Van?"

"I heard you talking to your mother yesterday evening. And then to our Dictator of Athletics."

"Dictator of——? Oh, you mean Teddy. I do believe you're jealous. Golly, it's human after all!"

They were moving on again, and Paul's remarks had to be addressed to the girl's back, which somehow took the edge off them.

"Don't you ever think about anything except trousers?" he asked coldly.

"Never. I'm just a stupid, frivolous girl. Not at all your type, I'm afraid. It's rather a pity. You don't look so bad, now you've taken those pansy, horn-rimmed spectacles off."

"Thanks for the testimonial. You're not unattractive yourself, when you forget that you're trying to be something out of a film weekly."

"Do you make a habit of listening-in to other people's conversations?"

"What on earth——?"

"You know quite well. Me and Teddy talking about Rip Van Winkle."

"You shouldn't talk so shrilly if you don't want people to overhear your confidential chats with your young men."

"He's not—I—really, you do get in my hair. Just a common snoop is what you are, Mr. Paul Perry. Perry spelt P-r-y, I suppose. Yes, I shall call you Paul Pry in future, my pet."

"You'd better not. And what did your young man tell you about Rip Van Winkle, anyway?"

"Never you mind. You're too young. And, if you call him my young man again, I'll get him to bust you in the nose."

"Yes, I can see you'd like that. The alluring little piece, with two great big he-men fighting over her."

"He-men? Don't speak for yourself, Paul Pry. I could knock you cold myself, I believe. I've learnt boxing."

"That must account for your over-developed arms. Like bolsters, they are."

"Go away. I hate you."

Paul derived a certain pleasure from this swapping of back-chat. There was the holiday feeling, the irresponsibility of indulging in a conversation which at other times one would have condemned as vulgar, dull and below one's standards. There was also the pleasure of finding that one could hold one's own at this kind of badinage. Paul's work had brought him into contact with many people who talked in this way, certainly: theoretically, he knew the argot backwards, but this was the first time he had practised it.

So, at least, he reasoned with himself, as he negotiated the last fifty yards of the cliff path. He would have been surprised to know what Sally was thinking at this moment. What a queer young man, she was thinking, and what a funny, pompous way he talks. I suppose that's the way clever people talk; it's rather attractive, really; no, it isn't, he's a hateful creature—saying my arms were too fat—I hate him. Paul would have been even more shocked if someone had told him that the real reason why he had enjoyed the exchanges with Sally was nothing more complex or recherché than that he was physically attracted by her. He could speak scientifically and at great length about sex attraction and sex antagonism: what he could not do was to recognise them when he met them in person.

The Wonderland private bathing beach lay in a cove between two small headlands. Under the limestone cliffs, the beach was flat and sandy; farther down it shelved sharply towards the sea, so that bathers soon found themselves out of their depth. Some rafts were moored about fifty yards from the shore, and already a number of visitors were diving from these or paddling about on brightly-coloured floats. On the flat part of the beach a game had been started. A ring of young men and girls were throwing a beach-ball across, which a man in the middle tried to intercept. The "he," Paul saw as he came closer, was Albert Morley. His pince-nez were off, he was beaming and making the most ludicrous attempts to catch the ball, jumping up and down like a frog on a hot plate.

What started it, Paul could not be quite sure. He fancied it was Edward Wise, though, who first deliberately threw the ball so that it struck little Mr. Morley and bounced off him back to the circle again. At any rate, it became infectious. Instead of throwing the ball past Albert or over his head, they all began to fling it at him, shrieking with laughter, flinging the ball harder and harder till the little man was trying to dodge it instead of catching it—and with no greater success. He was still beaming, though, taking it all in good part, but with the uncertain expression of one who is not quite sure whether a joke has not turned against him.

Paul became aware of Sally at his side. She was breathing hard, her eyes flashing.

"They're baiting him. It's not fair," she said. "Go and stop them, Paul. Please."

Some perverse impulse, which he heartily regretted a moment later, made him say, "Why should I? I'm not a policeman."

"Oh, you're too damned marvellous to be alive," the girl exclaimed, and hurried off towards the circle of players.

But Mortimer Wise, who was strolling about in his bathing-dress, got there first.

"Hey, hey!" he called good-humouredly, breaking into the circle. "Let someone else have a turn in the middle, Mr. Morley." He took the ball, pushed his step-brother

into the centre, and flung the ball neatly past his left hand.

Paul saw Albert Morley emerge through the circle, which had grown suddenly subdued, rubbing his eyes. For a horrible moment he thought the little man was crying. Then Albert said:

"It's the sand in my eyes. Off that ball."

Sally took out a handkerchief, put one hand on Mr. Morley's shoulder, and worked the sand out of his eyes for him. Watching her, Paul felt a real pang of humiliation. Her body, in the white bathing-suit, was beautifully formed: the tenderness in her attitude made him feel alone and resentful. He walked down to the sea, and swam out.

It was ten minutes later, not far from a throng of splashing, shrieking bathers, that Sally Thistlethwaite suddenly threw up her hands, opened her mouth, and disappeared under the water. They assumed she was just ragging about. But she was a long time reappearing; and, when she did, her face was white and she was trying to scream through the water that choked her throat. As she went under again, Paul was not far from her. But Edward Wise had seen it too, and his racing stroke brought him more quickly to where the girl had gone under. He dived, to emerge presently on his back, his hands under Sally's shoulders, and towed her towards the shore. In a moment, Captain Wise was by his side, helping him. Some distance behind they were followed by Albert Morley, Paul noticed, swimming a desperate breast stroke that gave the impression of a bicyclist in a very low gear, a comical look of consternation on his face.

By the time Paul reached land, Sally was sitting up between the two brothers, coughing out sea-water and saying:

"I'm sorry. I lost my head. Some silly ass ducked me and held me under a bit too long. When I came up again, I sort of couldn't keep up. I'm quite all right now. Really."

A small crowd had assembled round them. Captain Wise motioned them away, saying, "It's all right. No damage done."

But, when the crowd had dispersed, he turned to Sally with a serious expression.

"You didn't notice who it was, I suppose? We don't want that kind of thing happening here."

"No. I'm afraid not. Someone clutched my ankles and pulled me under and held me there."

"Didn't you struggle with him? Was it a man or a woman?"

"I don't know. A man, I suppose. The hands felt big. I couldn't get at him. He kept below me, somehow."

"Well, if you're quite sure you're all right——" Captain Wise moved away, beckoning his brother to follow him. Paul overheard him say, "It's probably nothing but a silly prank. Still, keep an eye out, Teddy, will you?"—and then something Paul could not catch.

"If I catch the joker, I'll give him something to take home," said Teddy angrily.

"Oh, no, no. The customer is always right, within limits. Keep the strong-arm stuff to yourself, my boy. We'll give the chap a warning, if we catch him."

But they did not catch him. Far from it. In spite of Teddy Wise's vigilance, two more duckings took place in the next hour. One victim was Albert Morley, the other no less a person than the resident manager himself. Neither of them received as severe a ducking as Sally; but Mortimer Wise, at least, was very angry. Not only angry, Paul observed, but worried. He saw him take his brother aside; and shortly after, Teddy fished pencil and paper from his blazer pocket, and was evidently

putting down the names of everyone who left the beach.

There must have been nearly a hundred bathers there, many of whom were still unaware that anything out of the ordinary had taken place—apart from what had happened to Sally. They were not to remain long in ignorance, however.

Paul went back to the chalets with Mr. Thistlethwaite, who showed no signs of his long immersion, though for the best part of an hour he had been floating on his back, very high in the water, like a freighter in ballast.

"Mark my words, Mr. Perry," he said, when they had attained the cliff top, "something is afoot."

"These duckings, d'you mean? Surely it's just some practical joker. He'll try it on once too often, and get caught, and be asked to leave the camp. That's all there is to it."

Mr. Thistlethwaite gave him a look of extraordinary significance, sighed dramatically, and said:

"I wish I could think it, sir. I am singularly susceptible to atmosphere, though. And I contend that all is not well with the atmosphere of Wonderland. The tone, as you might say."

"Did you notice it as soon as you arrived?"

"No, sir. I noticed it first at precisely six minutes past ten last night."

"Six minutes past ten? Why, what——?"

"If you will cast your mind back to the events of last night, sir, you will remember that the spotlight dance began at ten of the clock. Just before the dance ended, a certain announcement was made over the loud-speakers. At ten-six, the lights went up."

"Well?"

"You did not observe the expression on the faces of the staff—the dance-band leader, the hosts and hostesses, young Mr. Edward Wise, for instance?"

"No, I can't say I did particularly. I'd been dancing with Miss Jones. She looked normal enough, as far as I remember."

"The expression I noted, sir," continued Mr. Thistlethwaite in his most grandiose manner, "was one of dubiety—I might almost say of puzzlement." He advanced his huge face close to Paul's. "What deductions may we draw from that?"

"I'm trying to remember what the announcement was. Oh, I've got it. Something about a Mad Hatter."

"The allusion is to a fictitious character in a children's book entitled *Alice in Wonderland*, by the late Mr. Dodgson, of Christ Church. My firm had the honour of supplying him with a dozen shirts once."

"Yes, I had grasped that much. But I don't see——"

"The point is, sir, that the staff were taken aback by the announcement. The generality assumed it referred to some forthcoming competition. The staff evidently knew of no such competition. We may deduce, therefore, that some unauthorised person obtained access to the microphone under cover of darkness, and broadcast the announcement for purposes of his own."

"But——"

"You will notice particularly," Mr. Thistlethwaite continued in a voice that, for all its ludicrous, wheezing solemnity, imparted an unaccountable chill to Paul's blood, "the significance of *Wonderland*. Moreover, the word *mad* may offer food for conjecture. We have not seen the end of this matter."

And indeed he was right. As they passed the entrance hall of the great white building, they saw a considerable crowd gathered round the notice-board. It was an

angry crowd. They pressed forward and saw, written in capitals on a sheet of paper pinned to the notice board:

HOW DID YOU LIKE THE DUCKINGS?
WATCH OUT FOR MY NEXT BIT OF FUN.
THE MAD HATTER.

Paul listened to the comments of the crowd.

"Who's this Mad Hatter? …"

"Some people were ducked in the sea this morning. Held under. One lady was nearly drowned …"

"The management ought to do something …"

"One of the visitors was drowned this morning, they say, deliberately."

"Who did it?"

"The Mad Hatter …"

"Get out! It's just another of these competitions. Like the treasure-hunt. A mystery programme, like …"

"Watch out, Gertie! There's the Mad Hatter! Just behind you!"

——"Eee!——Oh, you gave me a scare! Why, it's only Mr. Thistlethwaite."

"At your service, madam …"

"Wonder what he'll do next? …"

"Someone ought to take steps. It's an outrage that …"

"We ought to tell Captain Wise."

"Captain Wise is in hospital, somebody said. He was nearly drowned this morning. Three others are dead.…"

"Well, this is a nice sort of holiday, I don't think …"

After lunch, a special meeting was called. The concert hall was packed when Captain Wise came on to the platform, looking grave but still the acme of efficiency.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I'm sorry to have to keep you indoors for a little on such a beautiful afternoon. Unfortunately, we seem to have someone here with a rather nasty sense of humour. This morning two visitors and myself were dragged under water and held there, down at the bathing beach. If it had happened only once, we should have assumed it was just a bit of innocent horseplay on someone's part. But the notice that was pinned on the board this morning, signed 'The Mad Hatter,' compels me to believe that some misguided practical joker is at work, systematically. In the first place, I appeal to him—or her—to realise what discomfort he is causing, and leave off. We provide quite enough amusements at Wonderland, surely, to satisfy anyone, and we don't want dirty games as well."

"Hear, hear!" boomed Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"I can assure you that my staff and myself, with your cooperation, will soon get rid of this public nuisance if he decides to persevere with his foolish pranks. Now I have just a few requests to make. First, those of you who were at the dance last night heard an announcement made over the loud-speakers, to the effect that you were to watch out for the Mad Hatter. It was dark at the time, except for the spotlight. Anyone could have come up to the platform from the body of the hall, or entered the hall by those two side doors at either end of the platform, and spoken through the microphone: it was placed, just then, on the extreme right-hand side of the platform. I have already consulted with the band, but none of them could see anything: like yourselves, they assumed it was a surprise announcement made by the management, and paid it no particular attention. If any of you noticed anything suspicious at the time, or anyone behaving in a suspicious manner after the lights went up, will he

please come to my office and tell me about it.

"Secondly, about the notice that was pinned up this morning. It was certainly not on the board at twelve o'clock, when my secretary put up several notices of my own. If anyone saw an unauthorised person putting up a notice between twelve and one o'clock, will he let me know? Thirdly, I'd be grateful if the members of the voluntary sports committee would come to my office as soon as we've finished here. And lastly, may I ask you all to keep this to yourselves. Quite frankly, a thing like this, if it is allowed to leak out—and you know how rumours grow—would be bad for Wonderland. My private belief is that the practical joker—or jokers—will have the decency to stop, now that they realise public opinion is against them. But I've my job to keep, and it's up to me to prevent any repetition of these stupid tricks—even at the risk of seeming to make a mountain out of a molehill. Well, that's all, I think. Thank you all very much."

A few minutes later, Paul Perry was sitting in the resident manager's office with the other members of the sports committee—five women and four men. Captain Wise's secretary, Miss Jones, and Teddy Wise were also there. The glass doors leading on to the balcony were open, and sunlight streamed into the office, lighting up the chromium desk, the filing cupboards, the picture of a regimental group that hung above a built-in electric fire, and Captain Wise's faint, humorous smile. Yes, thought Paul, he looks like the headmaster who, for the sake of discipline, has issued a public denunciation of some harmless rag, and is now relaxing in private to the boys-will-be-boys attitude.

Captain Wise made no reference to what had just happened, except for saying that they could not take any action till they had more facts to work on: no doubt a stream of visitors would soon be invading his office, volunteering information about what they had seen, or thought they had seen, or heard that someone else had seen—information which it would be his own task to sift: he did not wish to bother the sports committee with that kind of stuff.

The sea breeze, blowing gently and steadily through the open window, stirred his fine hair, left undisturbed the sleek head of Miss Jones, who sat with pencil and note-book at his side, demure, the perfect secretary, but still ravishing.

"Well now," said Captain Wise, "let's just run over the programme for to-morrow. In the morning——"

He broke off. There were footsteps padding up the stairs outside. The door opened. A pretty girl, in tennis-shoes, short white skirt and brassière, burst in. There were several others behind her.

"Oh, Captain Wise, I'm sorry to—but we found them in the pavilion like this," she panted. "Look."

She put a box of tennis-balls down on the desk, and opened the lid. The members of the committee were all on their feet, trying to look over Captain Wise's shoulder. The box contained half a dozen tennis-balls. They were all thickly coated with treacle.

IV

THEY ALL STARED at the contents of the box, dumbfounded. In silence, too, like a procession of devotees laying gifts upon an altar, the other girls who had been grouped inside the door came forward and placed boxes on the manager's desk.

"I suppose they are tennis-balls all right," said one of the committee at last. "Not bombs."

"I don't think you need worry, Mrs. Greenidge. Not even the I.R.A. would think of coating bombs with treacle," said Captain Wise."

"There was a piece of paper inside my box," the first girl said. "Look. Here it is."

Captain Wise gingerly took up the treacle-stained paper and read out, "'A present for Elsie, Lacie and Tillie. From the Mad Hatter.' Well, I'm damned! Elsie, Lacie and ——"

"That's just what I said to my friend," the girl declared. "It don't make sense. My name's Dolores. None of us are called——"

Miss Jones' cool, competent voice cut in: "Elsie, Lacie and Tillie are the names of the three little girls who lived at the bottom of a treacle well, Captain Wise."

"What on earth are you talking about, Miss Jones?" he exclaimed irritably. "Treacle well?"

"It was part of the dormouse's story in *Alice in Wonderland*. At the Mad Hatter's tea-party, you remember," Miss Jones replied in unruffled tones. There was a short silence.

"I see," said Captain Wise. "Where did you get these boxes?"

"They were the ones put out ready in the pavilion for tennis this afternoon," the first girl said.

"Well, I'm sorry you've been so inconvenienced, Miss Page. Teddy, will you go with these ladies to the store and give them some fresh boxes. Then come back here. Oh, and ask the head chef if a tin of treacle is missing."

"Oh, Mr. Wise," Paul heard the girl saying to Teddy as they trooped out, "I'm so glad you're coming with us. Reely. I don't feel safe with a homicidal maniac at large."

Captain Wise raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "That's what I was afraid of," he said. "If we aren't careful, this nuisance of a practical joker will get magnified into a Jack the Ripper."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" asked one of the committee, a lantern-jawed young man who looked like—and was—the type that is destined by fate to become secretary, live-wire and factotum of any number of clubs and committees.

Captain Wise rubbed his chin backwards and forwards over his upstretched fingers. An unusual moment of indecision, perplexity almost, seemed to be upon him.

"It's very good of you, Mr. Easton," he said at last. "But I think I really cannot ask any of you ladies and gentlemen to come in on this. It would not be fair. You're here for a holiday, and it's the management's business to see that your holiday isn't spoilt."

"But, honestly, it wouldn't spoil it—speaking for myself, that is—and I'm sure I express the opinion of my fellow committee members too," insisted the young man, warming to his work. "I mean, it'd be quite a novelty for us all, a new competition, find the Mad Hatter. See what I mean? Why, you could offer a prize—you know, a

reward of so-and-so will be offered to the person giving information which leads to the arrest of the Mad Hatter. Get everyone interested. It'd go, you know. You've got something there, Captain Wise."

The manager eyed him speculatively, then looked round at the rest of them. The committee, as is the way of committees, all began talking at once and more or less relevantly.

"It's an idea."

"What I say is, we have no mandate from the members of this camp to take such action. We're a sports committee."

"Well, hunting out this chap would be a sport. A blood-sport, you might say."

"I don't approve of blood-sports. The league for——"

"My boss hunts twice a week. He's a nice, kind gentleman. You'd say he wouldn't hurt a fly. A publisher, he is. He said to me one day——"

"My Flo says she goes in fear and trembling of the Mad Hatter. Still, she's learnt ju-jitsu. I reckon she'd give this joker something to take home. Snap your arm like a match, she can."

"Our Billy swapped his conjuring set at school for a box of practical jokes. Daft tricks, they were. I tanned his behind for him. What I say——"

"Has any of you," cut in a Miss Gardiner, a schoolmistress of heavy limbs and formidable eye, "studied the psychology of the practical joker?"

"I don't hold with these psychologists. They turn you inside out, and what have you to show for it?"

"Your tubes, I suppose."

"The motivation of the practical joker," persisted Miss Gardiner in tones like a mechanised brigade mopping up a disorganised enemy, "is generally inferiority feeling. Unable to take his place on equal terms within the community, his libido or power-urge drives him to expedients which will bring the community down to his own level. Ridiculed himself, he seeks to cast ridicule upon the community as a whole."

"Sort of tit-for-tat, you mean?"

"That would be an over-simplification of the psychosis," replied Miss Gardiner severely. "He is often, too, a person with a strong but suppressed sense of display. Söderman cites the case of one such individual, a member of a voluntary fire-brigade, who on several occasions perpetrated arson solely in order that he might be able to wear his uniform in public. Adler suggests——"

"What uniform does this Mad Hatter wear, anyway? A busby?"

"A top-hat, of course, silly."

Here the manager interposed tactfully. "I think we must close this interesting discussion, and get down to the proper business. I can assure you that your suggestions will be borne in mind, and I'll call upon you later if the need arises. For all we know, the practical joker may decide to call it a day. Now then …"

The committee began to discuss the details of Monday's programme. The main event was to be a treasure hunt in the afternoon. The course and clues for this had already been prepared by the management. It was the task of the committee members to assist the regular staff in distributing the clues, marshalling the "field," and making other arrangements. The clues were in sealed envelopes which would be given out at dinner to-night, so that earnest treasure-seekers should have the opportunity of studying them leisurely.

When the meeting was over, Paul Perry wandered out towards the tennis-courts. The games being played were not of a very serious nature, for the weekly

tournaments did not begin till Tuesday. Paul caught sight of the massive figure of Mr. Thistlethwaite seated in a deck-chair beside a court where Sally and Mr. Morley were playing against another couple. He sat down on the grass near Mr. Thistlethwaite's chair to watch the game.

"You are an exponent yourself, sir?" inquired his companion.

"Up to a point. I don't get much time for it, though, nowadays."

M. W.

"Ah. You gentlemen of the pen must scorn delights and live laborious days. An arduous calling, indeed, but few can offer such recompenses."

"Your daughter plays well. She seems to be carrying her partner."

"It runs in the family, sir. I myself used to have no little skill at ball-games."

Albert Morley, leaping desperately to intercept a side-line drive, missed the ball and fell sprawling. His opponents laughed: even Sally could not help smiling. Mr. Morley picked himself up, beamed round in the most genial manner, and resumed his stance at the net.

"A good sportsman, Mr. Morley," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "He can always take a joke against himself. It's one of the most sterling facets of our national character, would you not say, sir? Show me a fellow who can join in a laugh at his own expense, and show me one of nature's gentlemen."

Paul did not attempt to dispute this proposition. Instead, he presently inquired:

"How are the people here reacting to this practical joker? Getting a bit rattled?"

"The prevalent attitude is one of calm resolution. The Britisher is not easily to be intimidated. Business as usual, or—should I say?—pleasure as usual, is the watchword of Wonderland just now."

"I wonder what he'll do next. Treacly tennis-balls are rather an anti-climax after attempted drownings."

"Reculer pour mieux sauter, possibly, sir. The speculation is not without interest." Mr. Thistlethwaite turned towards Paul, his deck-chair creaking dangerously. "You made use of the term 'practical joker,' sir. Have you considered the implications?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Implications of what, Daddy?" It was Sally, who had finished her game and come to sit down beside them with Albert Morley.

"I was speaking of this individual who calls himself the Mad Hatter. In my judgment, the essence of a practical joke is that the perpetrator should not only witness the discomfiture of his victim but also receive due acclaim for his own ingenuity. A joke which you share with no one but yourself cannot give full satisfaction. What conclusions may we draw from that in the present context?"

"You mean," said Paul after a short silence, "that the fellow may have an accomplice—or several—to share the joke with."

"That is a possibility, sir," said Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"I think the chap must be a little touched," Mr. Morley volunteered.

"That, again, is a legitimate hypothesis. A madman," Mr. Thistlethwaite continued in equable tones, "is the one living creature who can share a joke with himself."

"Oh, Daddy, do shut up. You're giving me the goo."

"It might be a case of split personality, I suppose," said Paul. "An individual who wears by turns the motley of the jester and the sober respectability of—well, of such a person as yourself."

"Are you suggesting that Daddy is the Mad Hatter? You be careful, Mr. Paul Pry."

"I was merely making a scientific generalisation, Miss Prickly-pear."

"There is yet a third construction which might be placed upon these bizarre events," her father enunciated. He placed his finger-tips together, and paused dramatically. "It is, that the Mad Hatter is neither a practical joker nor mad. He may be as sane as you or I."

"But, Daddy, that's impossible. Either he——"

"In analysing any criminal—that is to say, anti-social—action, we should ask ourselves, not only who stands to gain by it, but also who stands to lose."

"Well, *you* stood to lose. If that beastly person had held me under the water much longer, your beautiful daughter would have been a poor, cold corpse."

Her father, leaning sideways, stroked her head and smiled. A rather fatuous smile, thought Paul, yet in an odd way it seemed to make him real. Mr. Thistlethwaite was so much of a Presence, you could hardly connect him with a private life, with human frailties and relationships.

"No," he was saying, carefully turning out his made-to-measure, discreet sentences. "It is not so much the guests as the Wonderland Ltd. company itself which stands to lose by a continuance of these outrages."

"The implication being that the joker is someone with a grudge against the company?" said Paul.

Mr. Thistlethwaite inclined his head in a gesture of solemn approbation: so might he look when some undergraduate had chosen, under his own suave guidance, a cloth which struck the happy mean between bravura and un-distinction.

Sally said: "But isn't it a very queer way of getting your own back on the company—to make things unpleasant for the visitors?"

"It might be the only way you could do it, don't you think?" said little Mr. Morley unexpectedly.

"Just so, Mr. Morley. And that gives us—does it not?—a pointer towards the miscreant."

"How do you mean?"

"He is a person without influence or standing. Whether his enemy is the company as a whole, or some official of it such as Captain Wise who would lose his post in the event of the outrages driving away any considerable proportion of the visitors, he himself is not in a position to attack the enemy save by these devious and undignified stratagems."

Mr. Thistlethwaite drew a deep breath and stroked the creases of his impeccable flannel trousers.

"One of the servants, perhaps, who has been given the sack?" suggested Paul. "But one would not expect them to be so conversant with the works of Lewis Carroll."

"I suppose even servants can read," said Sally. "Besides, you needn't have read *Alice in Wonderland* to have heard of the Mad Hatter. There are pantomimes."

"But I fancy that Elsie, Lacie and Tillie do not figure in the pantomime," said Mr. Thistlethwaite.

Paul Perry stiffened, regarded him more closely.

"The time-factor," Mr. Thistlethwaite went on, "is also of interest. The great majority of the visitors to Wonderland only stay for one week. Should the outrages persist into a second week, it would eliminate from suspicion all but the staff and the few remaining visitors."

"You've studied the affair pretty closely, I see," said Paul.

"I have given it some attention, sir. As an amateur of criminology, I——"

"What's that you've got in your finger-nail?" Paul asked abruptly, pointing to Mr.

Thistlethwaite's middle finger which was still running up and down the crease of a trouser-leg.

"Treacle, I apprehend," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite, unperturbed. "I chanced to be in the vicinity when that young woman found the tennis-balls, and I scraped one of them with my nail in order to determine the substance with which it was coated."

"Oh, I see." Paul felt sadly deflated. "And that's how you knew about the Elsie-Lacie-Tillie stuff?"

"Just so." An expression of mournful reproach came over Mr. Thistlethwaite's bloodhound features. "You did not surely suspect *me*, sir, of any complicity in these occurrences?"

"No. No, of course not. I just——"

"Oh yes, you did, Paul Pry. Don't try and wriggle out. You're looking guilty. You're blushing." Sally was really angry. Her grey eyes flashed a wintry fire. "You go snooping around—yes, I've seen you—putting things down in a little notebook when you think nobody's looking. And you dare to accuse Daddy of—why, you're just the sort of person who'd play these mean tricks yourself. And your fingernails aren't so jolly clean either."

"Talking of treacle," said Mr. Thistlethwaite with fluent tact, "I am reminded of an episode which took place in Oxford when I was an apprentice. It centred upon no less a personage than his late Majesty King Edward the Seventh. A very great gentleman, King Teddy. A leader of fashion, too. A very high-spirited young gentleman when in residence. Yes, indeed. It was the result of a wager made between the King and the Duke of Hamilton. The Duke, entering a grocer's establishment, asked for a pound of treacle. On the assistant inquiring whether his noble customer had brought a jar for the treacle, the Duke rejoined, 'Put it in my hat.' The assistant did so. Whereupon the Duke clapped the hat upon the assistant's head, flung down a sovereign on the counter, and decamped. Ah, yes. Full of spirits was his late Majesty."

"A truly royal jest," said Paul sourly.

"I don't see why they didn't have the treacle in a tin—I mean, a jar—all ready. At the shop, I mean," said Albert Morley.

"Do you impugn the veracity of the anecdote, sir?"

"Oh no. No. I only just wondered."

If we were casting present company for *Alice in Wonderland*, thought Paul, Albert would certainly be the dormouse. Mr. Thistlethwaite is Father William every time. Myself?—well, I'd rather fancy the Cheshire Cat. And Sally is quite pert and naïve enough for Alice. Paul gazed curiously at his hand, which Sally had taken up just now to demonstrate the alleged uncleanness of his nails: the contemplation aroused in him a feeling so unexpected, so strong that he was compelled to get up and walk straight away without a word from the party beside the tennis-court …

In the manager's office, high above the quiet sea, Captain Wise and his brother were talking.

"Well, that's the position, Teddy. Let me just run over what we've found out so far. Take this down, please, Miss Jones. It'll be useful to have it handy in case we turn the business over to the police."

Only by a faintest pursing of the mouth did Miss Jones manifest her astonishment and disapproval. Not so Teddy.

"Oh, look here, old boy. Not the coppers. That really is—why, it'd close us down in a fortnight."

"My dear Teddy, if this joker sticks seriously to his work, he can close us down in

a week. I shan't call in the police till the visitors force me to: but they will, if we don't trip up the Mad Hatter pretty soon. Well, now. The announcement over the loud-speakers last night. No one has come forward with information. The chap could have come out of the body of the hall, or from outside the hall through one of the doors beside the platform, or he could be one of the band—in fact, he could have been anyone you damn' well like, you or me or Miss Jones here."

"Not me, old boy. I was hoofing it with Sally under the spot-light."

"Yes, of course you were. Next, the duckings. Chap probably a man, certainly strong: large hands. Ninety-five people on the bathing beach; we'll be able to eliminate a good few of those, if we ask each of them to say who was near him when the duckings took place, but it'll still leave a packet of suspects. You took down the numbers on the identity discs of everyone who left the beach, the names of those who weren't wearing them, and the order they went away in. Not a perfect check, of course. The joker might have complicated things by pinching somebody else's disc for the occasion. Thirdly, the notice on the board. Unless the joker has an accomplice, he must have pinned it up himself. But Miss Jones swears the notice wasn't there at twelve o'clock. Therefore the joker must have put it up after his bathe. Almost certainly, he must have been one of the first people to leave the beach; for the later he left it to pin up the paper, the more people there'd be wandering around by the entrance hall. That narrows us down to the earlier names on your list. We'll go through them again in a minute. Lastly, the treacle business. The chef inspected his stores when you went to see him, but found no tin of treacle missing. Chap must have brought his own, which implies that his plan of action was prepared before he came, which looks as if we were going to hear a good deal more from him. We might search the chalets, but it'd make us unpopular, and anyway he'll have got rid of the tin now if he's any sense. Tennis-balls doped some time between 12.45, when the players put them away in the pavilion, and 2.15, when they were taken out again. That gives us a hell of a period for investigation, though we might have some luck with people noticed arriving late for lunch or leaving early. Damn it, the whole thing's so vague."

Captain Wise exasperatedly smacked the thinning hair on top of his head. "What we want is a detachment of secret police, or something."

"Should I try to obtain an insufflator and finger-print apparatus?" asked Miss Jones, pencil poised over note-book.

"Finger-print app——? Oh, I see. Yes, that microphone might have given us something. Well, perhaps——"

"All these Johnnies wear gloves now, don't they?" said Teddy.

"It's damned ticklish. We can't treat the visitors like a hords of criminals. I——"

There was a knock at the door. Paul Perry entered. "I'm sorry," he said, "I thought you might be alone."

"Alone? Come to confess your crimes, eh?" said Captain Wise with immense jocularity.

"No. But I thought I might be of use to you. About this Mad Hatter business. You see—well, I'd better tell you first what I came to Wonderland for…."

V

PAUL PERRY WAS speaking in his professional voice. He was still new enough to his job to be conscious of this—to wear it both with a certain pride and with a sense of playing a part, as a young officer might feel wearing his uniform for the first time. It was a crisp voice—the voice of the capable, anonymous executive, the smoothly-running cog—far different from his normal tones, which were by turns diffident and aggressive, but by no stretch of imagination could be called assured.

"Usually," he was saying, "we conduct our investigations in an informal way. Gossip picked up in pubs, in the street, and so on: sometimes a prepared series of questions, but asked naturally in the course of conversation. People are apt to draw in their horns if they think they're being got at, though of course Mass Observation is pretty well known to the man in the street by now, and I myself make no secret of being an Observer if asked point-blank. When they sent me down here to do a survey of a typical holiday-camp, I had intended to appear as an ordinary visitor. But these occurrences led me to think I could combine the survey with a bit of detective work."

"I see. How d'you suggest going about it?"

"Well, you could announce that I was here taking a survey on behalf of M.O. That would give me an official status, and interest people too, I think. I could work on the lines I've already planned out, but put in any questions which you consider might be of use for discovering the identity of the practical joker. I'd have a pull over any official detective, because the visitors would assume that all the questions I asked had to do with the survey."

"Yes, there might be something in it. What do you think, Teddy?"

"Sounds O.K. to me. Of course, it's up to Perry, I suppose. I mean, if he can rub along all right with the troops, that's that. Don't want him putting their backs up, though."

"You any ideas, Miss Jones?" asked Captain Wise quickly, seeing that Paul looked considerably disgruntled by Teddy's comments.

The secretary cocked her sleek head to one side, like a blackbird contemplating a worm. "I think the difficulty would be to fit questions concerning the practical jokes into any Mass Observation questionnaire. I doubt if they'd mix."

"Well, Esmeralda, I'll leave that to you and Mr. Perry." (Esmeralda, thought Paul. Esmeralda Jones. Good lord! And why ask her opinion just to override it?) "You two go and put your heads together, and see if you can make anything of it."

"Captain Wise is very worried about these developments," said Miss Jones primly as they descended the stairs.

"The nurse echoes the doctor."

She glanced at him sharply, then chuckled. "Yes, I suppose it did sound rather like that."

How nice, thought Paul, to talk to a girl who can pick up your allusions at once, a girl who isn't always on the sex-offensive. He eyed her with more attention. That she was sharp, on the spot, intelligent, one knew: one had also seen her at last night's dance, looking like something out of *Vogue*. The difficulty was to correlate these two persons—to decide which was the real Esmeralda. Paul Perry's earnestness about females was, it may be plainly seen, only equalled by his ignorance of them.

They were outside in the sunshine now, walking towards the swimming-pool

whence arose a confused hubbub of bathers taking their dip before tea. Miss Jones seemed to be leading the way.

"Aren't we supposed to be discussing this questionnaire?" he asked.

"The bath's a fine and public place," she said. "One should always discuss secrets in the middle of a crowd. It's the safest way."

"You seem to have studied the technique of conspiracy, Miss Jones."

"Esmeralda will do. It's not the name I should have chosen myself, but Miss Jones puts me straight behind the ribbon counter."

"I suppose you keep Miss Jones for the secretary, and Esmeralda for the——"

"The what?"

"Well," said Paul, feeling suddenly very young and inadequate, "for your private self. You're not a secretary all the time, I mean."

"I'm a secretary just now, my lad. Let's sit down here." She indicated a rustic seat on the grass terrace above the bath.

"Why *is* your employer so worried?" he asked. "After all, a practical joker can't do more than cause a bit of discomfort all round. It's not as if you had a homicidal maniac hanging about."

Miss Jones took off her horn-rimmed glasses, and put them in a case into the side pocket of her neat, polka-dotted silk dress.

"It's not so simple, Paul. This is only the biggest of three Wonderland camps, all run by the same company. As you can see, a great deal of money has been put into them, and if one of the camps came under a cloud, the whole enterprise might easily go under. You've no idea how dangerous the wrong kind of publicity is—even a little of it—for a show like this. And I wouldn't put it past some of our rivals to exploit it, either."

"Big Business does rather stink, doesn't it?"

"Don't be priggish, Paul," she said sharply. "Ninety per cent. of humanity would behave the same way to get rich, if they had the courage and the talent to pull it off."

"I can't see that makes it any better."

"Well, we're not here for a symposium on the ethics of business. We——"

"I say, Esmeralda," Paul interrupted excitedly, "d'you think it might be some rival company behind all this? They could send one or two hired agitators, so to speak, as ordinary visitors, to organise trouble in Wonderland. And then——"

Miss Jones laughed—a husky, mischievous laugh which made Paul blush—he did not know whether it was with pleasure or embarrassment.

"Now you *are* being fanciful. No, I don't think Big Business is quite as bad as all that."

"In America, they send agents-provocateurs into the Unions."

"We really must get down to business." She moved a little closer to Paul. He saw Sally Thistlethwaite glancing towards them from the springboard, and obscurely rejoiced. It was nice to put your heads together, as Captain Wise had expressed it, when it was the dark, soigné head of Esmeralda. He waved negligently at Sally, and turned again to his companion.

"You know," he complained, stabbing a finger at the crowd that shrieked, splashed, swam, sauntered or sun-bathed below them, quite regardless—it seemed—of Mad Hattters and their malevolent pranks, "I still don't think this is a good place to concentrate."

"The trained mind," Miss Jones replied austerely, "can concentrate anywhere. Now, tell me first what lines you had intended to work on.…"

By tea-time, a tentative scheme had been drawn up. If Captain Wise approved of

it, he would make an announcement at dinner giving Paul an official status, and Paul could begin his survey next morning. He suggested that, as this was likely to keep him pretty busy, he should resign his place on the sports committee. Miss Jones agreed, and asked him to nominate a substitute. He proposed Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"You'd better ask him if he's willing."

"I'll go along now. I want to get the scheme down on paper at once."

"Shall I have some tea sent to your chalet, then?"

"Thanks very much."

Paul ran Mr. Thistlethwaite to earth on the little veranda of his chalet, where he sat with his wife and daughter awaiting, no doubt, the clamorous harbinger of victuals. He asked him if he would be willing to take his place on the committee: with as much gravity and gratification as if he were being sounded about his willingness to accept a knighthood, Mr. Thistlethwaite acceded to the request.

"——The principle of local government," he perorated, "of which this committee is a minor but none the less significant variation, may be held as integral to a system based upon democratic institutions."

No one sought to challenge the statement. Presently Sally remarked:

"So they've sacked you, have they?"

"No."

"You seem awfully thick with that girl."

"What girl?"

"That secretary creature."

"Oh, her. Yes. She's an intelligent girl. And very good-looking, don't you think?"

"If you like that type."

"I do."

"I say, I believe you've fallen for her," Sally exclaimed with vast animation. "Paul Pry has fallen for a skirt! Wonders never cease!"

"Now, Sally, you mustn't tease. Don't mind her, Mr. Pry," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite comfortably.

"Perry is the name."

Mr. Thistlethwaite delivered a short homily on the emancipation of women. The Modern Girl, he claimed, while taking her place beside the male sex in the great march of progress, yielded nothing to her grandmother in point of femininity. He approved this emancipation as consistent with democratic development. Sally herself, he said, was going through a secretarial course. He understood that the post of secretary to an author was very much sought after, and hinted that Mr. Perry might consider his daughter in that capacity.

"Oh, Paul doesn't want a secretary. What he wants is a harem of high-brows in horn-rimmed goggles," announced Sally, rudely and alliteratively. Her father's protests were cut short by the sound of the gong, and Paul was left alone to draw up his plans.

Half an hour later he sat back and reviewed what he had written.

(i) Why did you choose Wonderland for a visit? (*a*) Saw an advertisement. (*b*) Heard of it from friends. (*c*) Other reasons.

(ii) Why did you prefer a holiday camp to ordinary lodgings at a holiday resort? (*a*) Greater facilities for gregariousness. (*b*) Luxury and cheapness. (*c*) Snob-appeal. (*d*) Novelty. (*e*) Other reasons.

(iii) (*a*) Is the luxury of this place likely to dissatisfy you with your normal home and work environment? (*b*) Does it create envy of those who can afford such

food, recreation, etc., all the year round? (*c*) Or do you accept such differences of income as in the nature of things?

(iv) Which do you find the chief attraction of the camp? (*a*) The natural surroundings. (*b*) The luxury. (*c*) The company of other people. (*d*) The entertainments and recreations.

(v) (*a*) Do you like your pleasures to be organised for you to the extent they are in Wonderland? (*b*) At other times do you prefer to be a spectator or a player of games? (*c*) Do you ever, while at the camp, feel a desire for solitude?

(vi) What is your opinion about the Mad Hatter? Is he (*a*) a practical joker? (*b*) mad? (*c*) more than one person? (*d*) a stunt on the part of the management? (*e*) a person with a grievance against the Wonderland Co.? (*f*) Any other theories.

(vii) Does the Mad Hatter's presence (*a*) make things more exciting? (*b*) incline you to leave Wonderland and never return? (*c*) leave you indifferent?

(viii) Do you think the management ought (*a*) to invite the co-operation of the visitors in discovering the Mad Hatter? (*b*) call in the police? (*c*) look after the affair themselves?

(ix) Give your name, age, sex, occupation, address, income, length of stay.

After reading it through, Paul ate the two lumps of sugar in his saucer, crossed out "gregariousness" in question (ii) and substituted "getting together with people," crossed out—reluctantly—"snob-appeal" and wrote in "More variety of entertainment," deleted "income" from question (ix).

He and Miss Jones had finally agreed that it was impossible to insert any questions which might give them information about the Mad Hatter, without making a direct reference to him. They had also decided that this part of the survey, as far as Paul was concerned, should take the form of a questionnaire rather than a series of interviews: he could be certain of getting a larger mass of material thus, a wider basis for further investigation, while it would give the management a fairly coherent picture of the way in which their visitors were reacting to the Mad Hatter. The idea was that, if Captain Wise passed the questionnaire, Miss Jones should duplicate five hundred copies of it, and these should be distributed at dinner to-night.

Taking the note-book, Paul strolled out of his chalet and made for the manager's office. He was not a little pleased with his own share of the questionnaire and the way he had managed to legalise his investigation. He also gave credit to Miss Jones for so skilfully bringing the Mad Hatter business into the open, for neutralising his fantastic activities through the medium of impersonal statistics and thus helping to preserve the visitors' confidence and good humour: Captain Wise was not the only psychologist on the Wonderland staff.

Captain Wise glanced through the questionnaire with the kind of eye that adds up three columns of figures simultaneously. Almost at once his pencil came down on question (vi).

"Whose idea was this — suggesting that the Mad Hatter might be a stunt of the management's? Surely we don't want to put a notion like that into their heads?"

"I suggested it," said Miss Jones crisply. "I heard one or two of the visitors advancing it as a theory, and the best way to show up the absurdity of it is to put it down in black and white."

"Mm. Well, let it stand. I think we should insert a question asking them whether they've seen or heard anything suspicious that might be connected with the practical jokes. People might be more willing to write that kind of thing down than come to

me in person about it."

"I thought of that. But wouldn't it be fatal to give them the impression that they're set to spy on one another?"

"Nonsense, Miss Jones. There's no spying about it. Anyway, I've already asked for such information, when I made my announcement at lunch. Put it in."

Odd, reflected Paul, the way he defers one minute and asserts himself the next. He must be fundamentally a weak character. The weak character turned to Paul:

"Very interesting, your part of it. Results might be informative for myself, too. Mind if I looked at them when they come in?"

"Well, I don't know whether——"

"Call it a bit of research on the company's behalf. Give you free drinks during your stay here," suggested Captain Wise outrageously.

"Really! It's not a matter of having to be bribed——" Paul began; then, catching a mischievous glance from Esmeralda Jones, seeing her firm, red lips beginning to form the word "prig," he stopped short. "I tell you what," he said. "Let's swap information. I'll show you the answers to my part of the questionnaire if you show me yours."

It was Captain Wise's turn to look dubious. He tapped the pencil against his regular, white teeth. "I suppose there'd be no harm in it," he said at last, "provided you treated it as strictly confidential. What do you think, Miss Jones?"

"I see no objection. It's irregular, I suppose: but the Mad Hatter's a bit irregular too."

"I suppose we can take it that you aren't the Mad Hatter yourself?" he asked, giving Paul one of his quick, jovial grins.

"You've only my word for it," replied Paul, very much aware of the shrewdness behind the manager's good-humoured gaze.

"Very well, then." Captain Wise turned to the questionnaire again. "Now is there anything we should add to this before we put it out?"

"I'd like to make a suggestion," said Miss Jones. "If Mr. Perry's willing, could we have one more question in the second part? Something on these lines: If you were the Mad Hatter, what single practical joke could you imagine playing which would most disorganise the life of the camp?

"The Mad Hatter, whoever he is, may quite likely fill in the questionnaire himself. He's evidently a bit of an exhibitionist, and he might be tempted to answer that question with particulars about a joke he really does intend to play. As a sort of dare. If he did, we should be that much forewarned. In any case, the answers would give us some idea of the sort of things we may have to guard against. My own belief is that the joker's only just getting into his stride, and he'll be working up to something really big."

"You're very pessimistic about him, Miss Jones. Getting rattled?"

"I've a job to hold down, Captain Wise," she replied tartly.

"All right, then. Put it in as question (ix), and make the one about their name, age, etc., number (x). Heaven knows what the directors'll say when they hear about this questionnaire—it's damned unconventional, to say the least. Let's hope the Mad Hatter'll be scared off now he realises we're taking him seriously."

Captain Wise shot his cuff with a gesture that indicated dismissal, revealing a small, expensive-looking gold wrist-watch. "Better start the great presses turning, Miss Jones. Thanks for your help, Perry: I'll trot you out at dinner to-night.…"

The little procession that, a couple of hours later, visited each of the two dining-halls consisted of Captain Wise, Paul Perry, Esmeralda Jones carrying the

questionnaire papers and the sealed envelopes for the treasure-hunt, and four of the Wonderland staff who would be distributing them. Captain Wise made one of his short, adroit speeches, which allowed neither the diners' interest nor their food to grow cold. Paul, concealing a certain bashfulness beneath a severely professional façade, was introduced in his true colours. Explaining the objects of the two parts of the questionnaire, Captain Wise emphasised that there was not the least compulsion on anyone to fill it in, but asked them—if they did so—to do it seriously and without consulting other people about their answers.

His speech aroused a noticeable flutter of curiosity and animation in each of the dining-halls. Mr. Thistlethwaite was heard to pronounce the proceeding an eminently democratic one: several girls squeaked coyly when the name of the Mad Hatter was mentioned; and the schoolmistress, Miss Gardiner, began to give her table a lecture on the workings of Mass Observation. Like the good showman he was, Captain Wise did not linger after he had made his speech, but marched quickly out of the hall, leaving the atmosphere of curiosity intact and his attendants to distribute the papers.

These were still much in evidence at the Guests' Concert, which took place an hour later. Concerts in Wonderland were of two kinds: every week one was given by the dance band, members of the staff, and a radio or vaudeville star hired for the occasion, and one by the guests themselves. This evening, dotted about the audience in the concert hall, visitors could be seen gripping song-sheets in perspiring hands or furtively blowing down wind instruments. Miss Jones had told Paul that there was seldom any difficulty in filling a programme from the local talent, and much of it was real talent too. It contradicted the statement so commonly made by cultural pundits to-day that the radio has killed musical initiative; this pleased Paul, who believed that not the least important function of Mass Observation was to puncture the generalisations and wishful thinking of cultural pundits.

Paul was gratified, too, by the stir his own appearance created amongst the audience. Heads were raised from the questionnaire papers, ribs were nudged. Paul, in a small way, had become a public figure. Unconsciously assuming a preoccupied, professional manner, he slipped modestly into a seat in a side aisle towards the back. A voice beside him said:

"Good evening, Mr. Perry."

He turned to find it was an angular, spotty, over-powdered girl, who was gazing at him with a blend of painful shyness and stern resolution.

"I hope you don't mind my speaking to you—— Oh, my name's Arnold, Phyllis Arnold, and this is my friend Janice Mears—you see, we had a discussion at my Left Book Club circle about Mass Observation and we didn't seem able to make up our minds whether it was a good thing or not—I mean, I think the idea's good, it's scientific after all, isn't it?—but some of your pamphlets—well, they make ordinary people, people like me, sound so silly and ignorant—the answers they give to Observers. Of course, I'm not working-class myself, but I'm sure there are lots of people like me who think about political and sociological questions, and your Observers never seem to meet anyone except sort of lumpen-proletariat or bourgeois elements who haven't an idea in their heads except having a good time."

Miss Arnold paused, from lack of breath rather than of matter.

"Perhaps you're right. But the conversations in our surveys are all reproduced verbatim as far as possible. It isn't so much that people don't think as that they're inarticulate, perhaps. You're an exception to that, Miss Arnold."

The girl blushed unbecomingly, and seemed to be struck dumb by her own audacity in having addressed him.

“I’m surprised to meet you here,” Paul went on, attempting a lighter note. “I should have thought you’d have been at a Left Book Club summer school.”

“I did go to one once. But a lot of it was above my head, to tell you the truth. Besides,” she added defiantly, “it’s rather preaching to the converted, isn’t it? There are far more opportunities here.”

“I think this is a lovely place,” Janice Mears said. She had a pretty, baby face, and a ribbon tied in a bow above her elaborate curls.

“This hall, you mean?”

“Oh, everything. It’s all so big and sumptuous, like on the movies. A veritable fairyland, I call it. Why, the palais-de-dance at home isn’t in it and we always used to think that pretty keen. And having people to wait on you, and wonderful meals, and private gardens to walk in—it’s like being in a movie yourself.”

Paul was taking rapid mental notes: this was right down his street. His eye took in the concert hall, whose height was emphasised by the severity of its lines, the walls sparely decorated in abstract patterns, the Wurlitzer towering above the platform.

“D’you think the Mad Hatter will do anything to-night, Mr. Perry?” asked Janice Mears.

“I shouldn’t think there’s much scope for him here.”

“I think it’s daft, acting like that. Anyway, I’m not going to let *him* spoil my holiday.”

And so say all of them, thought Paul. The Mad Hatter would have to adopt sterner measures if he wanted to get people like these on the run.

Teddy Wise was on the platform. “Folks,” he called, “lend me your ears. We’ve got a wealth of talent here to-night, and I believe it’s going to be the best guest-concert of the season. The first item on the programme is”—he glanced again at the paper in his hand—“is an old English folk-song, ‘I Will Give My Love An Apple,’ sung by one of our leading amateur basses, Mr. Bernard Scripps. Mr. Scripps, forward please.”

A large man, with a bald, conical-shaped head and ragged fringe of moustache, took up his stance on the platform amid applause. The accompanist sat down at the piano, arranged the music, cracked her finger-joints. Mr. Scripps’ moustache waved out gently, like a curtain in a draught, as he exhaled a few deep breaths. Then he nodded to the pianist. He struck an attitude, she the opening chord.

“Glug,” said the piano.

Mr. Scripps plunged manfully into the song. His voice was of a terrific resonance, and he let them have it full organ at the start, his moustache agitated like a reed-bed in a hurricane.

“I will give my lerv an erple,” he thundered.

“Glug glock cluck glug glug,” announced the piano.

Everyone was staring at the pianist who was desperately picking at the keys. Roiling his eyes like a terrified horse, Mr. Scripps persisted: but singing to that extraordinary accompaniment was like trying to walk through a morass. After the first stanza, he frankly gave it up. The accompanist, almost in tears, beckoned him, and they peered together into the vitals of the instrument.

The Mad Hatter certainly had not had much scope in this austere hall. Short of poisoning the performers, there was nothing for him to do except tamper with the piano. And this he had done with considerable effect. He had treated it generously to treacle.

VI

AT 7.50 THE next morning, Sally Thistlethwaite came awake from a lurid but not altogether unpleasing dream whose *leit motif* had been a duel fought between Teddy Wise and Paul Perry. Like a running fight in a gangster film, this duel had changed locale with bewildering speed. At one moment, the combatants were assaulting each other with beach-balls, egged on by a bevy of glamorous bathing belles: the next, they were far out to sea, flailing about in water that rapidly assumed the colour and consistency of treacle: this naval battle, in turn, faded into a land engagement—Mr. Perry, entrenched behind a Maginot Line of grand pianos and wearing a top hat with a ticket in it, bombarding Mr. Wise with tennis-balls that burst into showers of questionnaire papers. Captain Wise figured intermittently, playing the rather harassed rôle of a referee at an all-in wrestling match. Other figures, too, flitted about on the outskirts of the dream—notably that of Miss Jones, who showed herself consistently in colours of gross treachery and partisanship, like a goddess in some Homeric combat. The duellists themselves evidently had all the arts of Proteus at their finger-tips, for each of them found no difficulty in turning into Mr. Thistlethwaite, a serpent, King Edward VII, a variety of domestic animals, the principal of Sally's secretarial college, and even into Sally herself.

Not being of an introspective turn of mind, the girl did not ask herself why the feeling of warm gratification should persist after she had awoken, but was content to enjoy it. She stretched herself on the Sleepeesi mattress which fulfilled all the promises of the Wonderland brochure, flung off the bedclothes, and dabbled her toes in the stream of sunlight that poured through the open window. Another fine day. The treasure-hunt. Even if it rained, there'd be plenty to do here: she had not tried the rifle range yet, or the ping-pong tables; and there was the cabaret show organised by the women visitors—she'd have a part in that.

If only these silly practical jokes didn't go on. They were so childish. Wasn't it perhaps one of the kids in the camp, or a gang of them? No, of course: the hands which had gripped her ankles and pulled her down so cruelly under the sea had not been a child's hand. Besides, there was what Daddy had said last night after the concert. He didn't believe it was a practical joker at all. Teddy Wise had been saying how strange it was that no one had come forward with information—in a camp of five hundred people you'd expect there to be lots of gossip. Then Paul Perry said it was because everyone had plenty to do here: gossip was the recreation of those who couldn't afford any other pleasures: or some high-brow remark like that. And Daddy said, didn't the same thing apply to the Mad Hatter? No one would indulge in practical joking for its own sake when there was so much ordinary fun to be had here. Paul said this was a false analogy—he *would* dig up some impossible dictionary word. Then Daddy got very mysterious and said he had a theory, anyway, and he'd prove there was calculated, cold-blooded malice behind the Mad Hatter's tricks. It had made her own blood run cold for a moment, the way he said it.

Well, whoever he was, he'd been a damp squib so far. Duckings and treacle wouldn't go very far, if he really wanted to wreck people's holiday. Of course, the piano business had annoyed the visitors all right. There'd been mutterings about why the management didn't take more efficient precautions: surely it ought to be easy enough to catch a chap who wandered about with a great tin of treacle, they said.

But Teddy had soon got them into a good humour—all except Mr. Scripps, that is; Mr. Scripps had been tearing mad and flung off and said he was going to leave the next morning and wanted his money back. Poor Mr. Scripps—he'd looked so funny, blowing out his moustache and trying to sing while the piano went glug glug glug. People had laughed at him—you could hardly blame them—but singers are so touchy if anything goes wrong.

Yes, Teddy had been marvellous. Turned the whole thing into a joke, got everyone laughing—nicely, not the way they'd begun to laugh at Mr. Scripps, called for some weight-lifters to help fetch in another piano out of the dance hall. The concert had gone ahead all right, just as if nothing had happened. Well, perhaps that wasn't quite true. Some of the performers were up the spout—nervous about—what might happen next, in the middle of their turn perhaps. There was the girl who tried to play a bit of classical music on a clarinet: well, high-brow music was pretty awful, but it certainly couldn't have been meant to sound like that: she'd said there was something wrong with the reed, after she'd broken down, and everyone had been very sympathetic. And then, you couldn't help being a bit put off by the way the Wonderland staff kept coming and going and whispering together. Captain Wise had asked if the visitors would mind having their chalets searched, and they'd taken a vote and everyone agreed: they had to agree, of course, after complaining that the management wasn't doing its stuff. But it was difficult for the audience to concentrate on the music when they were expecting someone to come in any moment and say that an empty tin of treacle had been found in somebody's chalet. You couldn't be quite sure it wouldn't turn up in your own, for that matter.

Still, all things considered, the concert didn't go off too badly. And Teddy was certainly marvellous the way he'd handled them.

Teddy's a nice boy, too. Handsome as they come. And you know where you are with him. Quite different from Paul Pry, who talks a different language and always seems to be trying to get at you. Paul has nice hands, though. He'd not be bad-looking if he didn't scowl so much. He's interesting, too, in a way Teddy isn't. Of course, Teddy has to mind his p's and q's, being games organiser here; he mustn't show more interest in one girl than in another; it's like being an officer on a ship. I wonder is Paul interested in me. He seems to go about with that secretary creature a lot. He'll need someone to look after him, if that girl gets on the war-path. She'd only be leading him on, too: Captain Wise is what she's really after, I'll bet a dollar: look at his Lagonda and his clothes and everything—well, if I was a gold-digger like Esmeralda Jones, I'd look that way myself. Still, no reason why I should let her get the claws into Paul. He's so helpless. The bookish type. Books don't teach you how to deal with vamps like the Jones. Funny my dreaming about them. Funny if Paul and Teddy really did have a fight. Poor Paul'd certainly get beaten up. Fancy fighting in a top hat, like he did in my dream! It had a ticket in it. The Mad Hatter's hat. Well, of course, it was nonsense. It was just a dream. Snap out of it, Sally. Forget it.

The girl reached out her arm for an envelope that lay on the floor where she had thrown it last night. It contained the first clues for this afternoon's treasure-hunt. The system on which the treasure-hunt worked was that each competitor received clues directing him to a certain point, where he would find a second clue hidden to indicate his next objective, and so on. In all, there were six main clues hidden on the Wonderland grounds or the adjacent countryside: to prevent it becoming simply a game of follow-my-leader, the initial clue led in a number of different directions, thus dispersing the company at the start. On reaching your first base, but not before, you were allowed to pair off with any other competitor who turned up there: the

clues at all these first bases led to a single second base, and from there all the hunters were working on the same trail.

Sally had meant to study her initial clue last night—the year before she had only been baulked of victory by a huge and ferocious bull which appeared in the last field between her and the treasure and turned out later to be a cow—but she had dropped off to sleep before looking at it. Rolling over on to her stomach, she opened the envelope and drew out a sheet of paper. As she glanced at the clue, her restless body grew rigid.

> "A hermit lives in a wood,
> His beard is long and white,
> In the old man's beard by the roadside bush
> I'm hidden out of sight."

Sally's eye fell upon the open window, its curtains stirring a little in the breeze. A waft of panic went through her. Automatically, like a sleep-walker or as if she had felt a sudden chill, she put on her dressing-gown. She took herself by the scruff of the neck and forced herself to go over to the window.

There was nothing outside. Well, of course, there wasn't. Nothing but the rhododendron bushes and the birches which stood at the back of this row of chalets: the "sylvan surroundings" so justly celebrated in the Wonderland brochure. There was nothing to be afraid of. They hadn't crept closer to her window in the night. Sally turned away, knocked at the partition door, went through into her parents' bedroom.

Mr. Thistlethwaite was sitting up in bed, meticulously filling in the questionnaire paper while his wife drank her early-morning tea. The scene was so ordinary, so familiar that it broke down Sally's resistance. Sobbing a little, she flung herself on to the bed.

"What is it, girlie" asked Mr. Thistlethwaite, startled. She pushed the clue-paper blindly into his hand.

"He must have been into my room last night. He took the real one away and left this."

"Now, now. Whatever——?" Mr. Thistlethwaite read aloud the sinister rhyme. "I don't understand. 'He took the real one away'?"

"Yes. It's the first clue for the treasure-hunt, don't you see? It ought to be, I mean, but——"

"But what's wrong with this, dear" said her mother. "It sounds just like an ordinary clue to me."

"It can't be. Don't you see?—it means that the next clue is hidden in the hermit's beard—that horrible old man who lives in the wood up there—the one who shook his fist at me. Well, it's absurd. Captain Wise, or whoever makes up these clues—they'd never hide one in the hermit's beard and expect him to stand about while visitors searched him for it. It's mad."

"It would certainly appear in somewhat questionable taste," said Mr. Thistlethwaite, recovering his equipoise.

"Well then. If this isn't one of the genuine clues, it must have been written just to frighten me, and left in my room. Everyone knows I'm scared of that dreadful old hermit, and——"

"One moment." Her father raised a fat and imperious finger. "'Everyone knows?' Whom have you told about him, apart from your mother and myself?"

“Golly! That’s quite true. ’S a matter of fact, I was rather ashamed of being frightened. I didn’t tell anyone except Teddy. Or did I? No, I didn’t. Oh yes, Paul Pry overheard me then. He was teasing me about it yesterday morning when we went down to bathe.”

An expression of vast sagacity flooded Mr. Thistlethwaite’s face. “That is most suggestive. Unless, of course, Mr. Wise or Mr Perry passed on the information to someone else. Mr. Perry and Mr. Wise. Hrrumph. It seems as if one of them must be the, ah, poison pen behind this missive. In which event——”

“Mr. Wise and Mr. Perry? It’s nonsense,” said Mrs. Thistlethwaite. “They’re both very kind, pleasantly spoken gentlemen. You’ll be telling me one of them is the Mad Hatter next. I can’t think what you two are making such a fuss about.”

“Oh, but Mummy, can’t you understand——?”

“My love, surely it is abundantly evident that——” exclaimed Sally and her father simultaneously.

“This is not such good tea as we have at home, do you think, James?” Mrs. Thistlethwaite mildly poured herself another cup. “What I’ve been trying to say—only you two were so excited you wouldn’t let me get a word in—is that you’re making a fuss about nothing. Show me that poetry. Yes, I thought so. You girls nowadays never seem to learn anything useful at school. You can’t cook. You can’t sew. It’s all French and Science and papier mâché. Now when I was a girl——”

“Mother, will you *please* keep to the point?”

“When I was a young girl—and that was a long time ago, but I still remember some of the things I learnt—they used to teach us botany. Our teacher was a Miss Brown, I recollect. Botany, she always said, was such a lady-like pursuit. I still have some of the pressed flowers I used to collect then. I do believe I won a prize for it once. Oh, where was I?”

“You were talking about your hectic girlhood, Mother,” said Sally with restraint.

“Of course. Well, this old man’s beard is nothing to do with a hermit. Hermit indeed! Poof! It’s a plant. Some people call it Traveller’s Joy. Its flowers have four thick downy sepal and in the autumn the styles lengthen into the shape of little white beards. All this poetry you’ve both got so excited about means is that there’s a clue hidden amongst the old-man’s-beard on a bush beside the road. What you two need is a good dose of salts—this Mad Hatter has got on your nerves.”

“Hum … Chk, chk, chk … Well, indeed,” Mr. Thistlethwaite muttered, avoiding his wife’s eye.

“And this *is* the real clue after all?” exclaimed Sally. She bounced over the bed and embraced her mother. “Oh, I’m so relieved Honestly, it did make me windy. Darling, you stay at the top of your class!”

“That’s my stomach you’re kicking,” complained Mr. Thistlethwaite.

Sally’s face fell. “Oh, but I’ll still have to go up to that wood to find the clue. Brrrh! I hope the old hermit isn’t at home. I do think it was silly of Captain Wise to choose a place like that to hide it. He knows the hermit hates this camp. And he’ll be livid with a lot of visitors trampling all round his hideout.… Golly, look at the time! I’m due for the P.T. class.”

Five minutes later, a little out of breath but becomingly flushed, she was on the recreation ground where every morning at 8. 30 the Games Organiser or one of his assistants conducted them in the milder form of physical jerks. To-day Teddy Wise was officiating in person.

“Hallo, here’s Sally,” he said as she approached. “And all glorious without.”

“All glorious without what?” Sally gave the regular response to the well-worn

gambit, but with less vivacity than usual. Teddy's automatic facetiousness seemed today so very much part of a stock-in-trade: a loud-speaker could do the job just as well. Am I going off him? was the way she put it to herself.

She took her place in the front rank of the little platoon, whose uniform was shorts, brassière, and sandals; followed the exercises Teddy sketched out in easy, perfunctory movements; vaguely heard the grunts and protests of the older women at the back, whose elasticity was not a match for their earnestness. Doing a trunk-roll, her eyes on Teddy to keep the rhythm, she thought, he's got a marvellous chest, just like Johnny Weissmuller: and his arms—wish I could tan like that—of course, he's doing it all the summer: must be funny, just playing games all the time, queer sort of life—and women yearning at you from every angle and not being supposed to make a pass at any of them, like a clergyman: wonder how he gets on when he's alone? He came to her with an odd, delayed sensation of surprise, that she could not imagine Teddy alone.

They paused for a breather. Teddy yawned and stretched. "Got a bit of sleep coming to me," he said. "Late night."

"Oh, Mr. Wise, was you on guard—against the Mad Hatter, I mean?"

"No fear. Safely leave him to you muscular ladies, what? No, I had to clock in for planting the clues for the treasure-hunt. Moonlight operations. Not so good. I've stationed a few bulls along the course, Sally, just to keep you on the hop. Hey, she's gone off into a trance! Wake up, Sally! What are you staring at?"

He turned slowly to see what she was pointing at. "It's Miss—what's her name?—the schoolmistress one—Gardiner. What on earth is she carrying?"

For Sally, the moment was a far worse one than when she had been dragged under the water. That had been too sudden for fear: this was so slow that every gradation up to the topmost pitch of horror could be exactly felt. It was like the feet of mourners, moving reluctantly and irresistibly to the open grave. And yet, when she looked back on it later, there was nothing really to account for the paralysis of terror that had come over her. Nothing but a large-limbed woman, in jumper and tweed skirt, walking towards them with steps that neither dragged nor hurried—walking out of the leafy morning and curving crescent of the chalets, holding something in her arms.

"What the devil's she carrying?" Teddy repeated weakly. You could see nothing at this distance but a white blur against the strident orange jumper.

Steadily, almost with the deadly, impersonal intent of some wireless-controlled tank, Miss Gardiner advanced towards them. She carried the thing un-selfconsciously but somehow unnaturally, as a capable spinster might carry a baby. When she got nearer to them, her pince-nez flashing in the sun, she held it out with the gesture of one making a formal offering. It was a dog—a wire-haired terrier, its body arched into a hideous sickle.

"Mr. Wise," she said in a voice like doom, "why were no precautions taken? This dog has been poisoned."

"Really, I'm terribly sorry, but——"

There was a scream behind Sally. A woman rushed forward and snatched the dog out of Miss Gardiner's arms. "It's Bingo!" she cried. "It's my little dog! You"—she stared distractedly at Miss Gardiner—"you did it! You poisoned Bingo!"

VII

PETS' CORNER HAD been the brain-wave of a Wonderland director, and part of the company's policy to go one better than any existing holiday camp. When other camps set their faces against the introduction of domestic animals, the Wonderland brochure's slogan was: "Don't leave your dumb friends at home! Bring them to Wonderland and install them in our superbly equipped Pets' Corner! Give them a holiday too—scampers over the fragrant turf, bathes in the sparkling brine, everything to delight a doggie's heart!"

This director, however, had considerably overestimated the pet-mindedness of the Wonderland clientèle. Most of these were young people who lived in towns and evinced none of the upper-middle-class's morbid cynophilia, while those that did keep pets seemed only too ready to escape from their demands while on holiday. So Pets' Corner, with its bijou, semi-detached kennels and hygienic drinking troughs, remained for the most part untenanted—a monument to a great illusion. Such dumb friends as did turn up might well have considered themselves double-crossed by the company, moreover; for scampering over the fragrant turf and bathes in the sparkling brine were rigorously confined to the early hours of the morning and late in the evening. For the rest of the day, they had to be taken about on leads or stay moping in their palatial concentration camp.

Irked by these restrictions, Bingo—a spirited liberty-lover—had the day before vented his feelings on the first available victim, which happened to be Miss Gardiner's Siamese cat. Bingo wished no part of any cat, and the unnatural aspect of this one was an added offence to him. He himself had been on a lead and the cat curled up on Miss Gardiner's shoulder, when they met in the course of their afternoon walk. Bingo slipped his lead, jumped at Miss Gardiner, dislodged the cat, achieved a mouthful of its fur, and chased it happily up a tree. It was then that Miss Gardiner had informed Bingo's owner that, if the lady could not keep her brute under control, she herself would poison it. Accustomed to dealing with classes of twenty to forty infants, Miss Gardiner was presumably no believer in half-measures. Still, spare the rod spoil the child was not quite the same thing as spare the poison spoil the dog.

Most of the onlookers, therefore, while shocked by the scene and sympathetic towards Bingo's owner, had no doubt that her accusation was purely hysterical. Looking back on it later Paul Perry, who witnessed the event and went with the group of people that by tacit consent followed the bereaved woman towards Pets' Corner, was inclined to think that this was the first moment When the Mad Hatter really made his mark. It was noticeable that, for a little, no one mentioned his name at all; and, when they did, it was in uneasy whispers and with a certain closing of the ranks, as though the shadowy creature—a phial of strychnine still in his hand—might be awaiting them anywhere along the chalet avenue.

They encountered, however, no one more alarming than Mr. Thistlethwaite. He quickly took charge of the proceedings, in default of Teddy Wise who was still heavily engaged by Miss Gardiner: they could still hear her voice, tapping out like a ruler on a desk, as she demonstrated to him the gross inadequacy of the management.

Mr. Thistlethwaite addressed a few well-chosen words of condolence to the dog's owner, sent a girl scurrying off to fetch the resident doctor, established the fact that a

woman sleeping in one of the outlying chalets had been awoken by a dog barking at twenty minutes past three, deduced that this might have been the hour of the crime, and led the party safely round the wood beyond which Pets' Corner lay and whose tangled undergrowth was supposed to blanket any disturbance the animals might make at night.

When they reached the scene of the crime, they found that the other occupants of Pets' Corner—three dogs and Miss Gardiner's cat—were unhurt.

"I wonder why he didn't poison the lot while he was about it," said Sally to Paul. "I suppose he threw a bit of poisoned meat over the wire into Bingo's kennel. What a beastly, dirty trick!"

"Yes, it's queer, that. It looks as if he was striking at one person at a time now. And he's learning the weak spots, too."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, that chap Scripps. The Mad Hatter realised he was of the *genus irritabile* of singers, so he doped the piano for him, knowing it would make him fly off the handle."

"But how did he know Scripps was going to be the first performer?"

"All the performers were told the order of the programme beforehand, I imagine. The Mad Hatter could easily have found out from one of them. And then this dog. He might have poisoned any or all of the animals, but he chose the one whose death would cause really bad feeling. There'd been a row about Bingo and Miss Gardiner's cat—but of course you know that. Yes, the chap's getting his hand in all right."

Sally shivered and turned away. They were quite near the rather dilapidated stone wall which marked the boundary of the camp, she noticed.

"I say, Paul," she exclaimed suddenly, clutching his sleeve. "I've got an idea."

"Yes?"

"Supposing—no, it sounds too absurd. But look here, will you partner me in the treasure-hunt this afternoon? We're supposed all to start separately, but nobody'll notice if we slip off together."

"Treasure-hunts aren't much in my line. Anyway, I shall be going over the questionnaire papers after lunch."

She shook his sleeve vehemently. "Oh, don't be so stuffy, my pet. You know you'd rather be with me than glooming over those dreary papers."

"You flatter yourself. And they're not."

"Be human for once. Say you'll come. Please."

"But what's it all about?"

"Promise not to tell anyone."

"Yes."

"Well, you and I are going to hunt for the Mad Hatter."

There was a short pause. The wind gave the leaves overhead a little shake, and passed on.

"All right, then. I'll come. But I bet it's a wild-goose chase."

At this point the camp doctor arrived. Dr. Holford was a young man, new in practice, who was only too glad to receive a month's free holiday at Wonderland in return for services which were seldom called upon. Mr. Thistlethwaite came forward from the group of people that was standing, rather aimlessly now, beside the late Bingo's kennel.

"Doctor Holford?" he inquired, with a major-domo's gesture. "You have been apprised, doubtless, of the latest outrage. In order to lay the miscreant by the heels, we must satisfy ourselves as to the exact time when the poison was administered. We

already have received some indications on this point, which may be clinched by your own opinion. This way, sir, if you please. There he is. Poor Bingo. The innocent victim of a ruffian, who thereby struck a cowardly blow at the heart of the community." An easy tear came to Mr. Thistlethwaite's eye.

Concealing his bewilderment beneath a professional briskness, Dr. Holford knelt down beside the animal. Presently he said:

"Strychnine. I'm afraid I can't tell you at all exactly what time it happened. I'm no vet. Three to six hours ago, maybe."

"Possibly, sir, a post-mortem would——"

"No. I won't have that," exclaimed Bingo's owner. "I don't want my poor doggie cut up. I'm going to bury him."

"Quite. It would be little use in any case," said the doctor with soothing tact. "There are five hundred people in this camp, and knowing what time the dog was killed wouldn't get us much nearer to finding out which one of them did it."

A girl said: "Mr. Wise was out last night, hiding the clues for the treasure-hunt."

Mr. Thistlethwaite inflated himself. "Young woman, random insinuations are both unreasonable and otiose. Let us hear no more of them."

"All right, all right," replied the girl, much aggrieved. "There's no need to jump down my throat. I was only trying to be helpful. What I meant was, Mr. Wise might have seen someone prowling about near here."

"In that event, he will communicate the information to the right quarters."

"And I don't see what business of yours it is, either, bally-ragging people and chucking your weight about. And what a weight!" the girl added, sensing an advantage.

To Paul's intense embarrassment, Sally commented in a whining travesty of the girl's tone, "Boo-hoo! I want to go home to Mother."

The imminent scene was averted by the arrival of Teddy Wise in person. He declared that he'd seen no one suspicious during his night operations.

"We may take it, sir, you were not in the immediate vicinity of Pets' Corner?"

"Oh well, that'd be telling secrets. If I said yes, you'd know that one of the clues was hidden near here. Not so good. I can tell you this, though. Members of the staff were keeping an eye on the chalets and the main buildings all night—and they'll go on doing it for the duration. So you ladies can shut the glad eye o' nights quite regardless. Unfortunately, we never imagined the joker would take a stab at Pets' Corner, so there was no one watching here. Bad show. Well, chaps, the breakfast's getting cold. Let's trek along. Oh, and by the way, my brother says the management will give you another dog, Miss Lightfoot. Not the same thing, I know. Old friend, and all that. Can't really replace 'em. Still, we'll get you a fine little chap—any one you like to choose. Pop you in to Applestock this morning, if you like, and have a look round for one."

This announcement of Captain Wise's bounty was received with a strangled sob by Miss Lightfoot and gratified murmurs from the rest. The management did not normally hold itself responsible for the health of animals brought to the camp.

At breakfast, the conversation was largely occupied by the Mad Hatter. He was still, to most, more of a curiosity than a menace: but his latest exploit, together with the second part of the questionnaire, had evidently stimulated interest.

"I suppose," said Mr. Morley to Paul, bobbing his head and wiping his mouth with a paper napkin in a way that contrived to be both ungainly and self-deprecatory, "I suppose this business is going to interfere with your own investigations, Mr. Perry."

"Well, yes. I'm afraid it may make them quite impossible. You see, the object was to present a survey of normal life in a holiday camp. And things seem to be getting less normal every minute."

"I've been filling in my questionnaire paper, Mr. Perry. Very interesting it was to me. Though I couldn't always follow what you were driving at. That bit about whether you prefer to be a spectator or a player of games, for instance."

"Well, the object of that was to find out if visitors behave in a different way here from their ordinary life. Almost everyone at Wonderland goes in for some of the recreations. I wanted to see if they played the games here simply because—well, because they're out to get their money's worth, or because they always play games when they get the opportunity."

"Oh. Ye-es, I see," said Albert Morley, who palpably did not. "But I still don't see what's behind it. What good does it do to find out that sort of thing? If it was a statistical survey on behalf of a business firm, it'd be different: that's part of the science of salesmanship: I've studied it a bit, mind you—I like to keep up with the times, and you never know when it'll come in useful. Suppose I got the—decided to join some other firm, say. What I mean to say is, I read a book about Mass Observation once. It had all about how people behave in pubs, how they light their pipes, what they say when they invite another chap to have a drink—well, honestly, it had me beat. I thought it a lot of fuss about nothing."

"You don't believe in anthropology—in acquiring knowledge about the behaviour of human beings?"

"It's all right for scientists, I suppose," said Albert dubiously. "But you won't get the general public interested in it."

"The general public seems quite interested at the moment. Look at all those people studying their questionnaires."

"You haven't got my meaning right, sir." Mr. Morley looked baffled, but pertinacious. "What I'm trying to say is, the public doesn't want science to tell them what they know already, like——"

"So much the worse for the public. Anyway, they *don't* know it. All sorts of new institutions, new manners, new modes of behaviour are springing up to-day, mixing with survivals of past customs. Human life is always shifting, like sandbanks, and someone ought to keep it charted."

Mr. Morley beamed all over his rosy little face. "Ah, now you're talking. That's more like it. That's the romance of science."

"Science isn't romantic."

"Oh, but it is, Mr. Perry. Believe me. Think of the stars. I've read them—Jeans and Eddington—I read quite a bit in my spare time. All those worlds burning away, billions of miles up there, all part of the cosmic dance. And then some of these youngsters say they don't believe in God. I've often wished I could afford a telescope —a proper astronomer's one——"

"We seem to have got rather far from the subject," said Paul coldly. He had all the novice scientist's contempt for the layman. He did not really intend to snub Mr. Morley, perhaps, but the little man's wanderings had driven him almost to distraction. It was difficult, also, to keep one ear open for Albert Morley and at the same time listen to the talk going on all round. Paul had a separate note-book, in which he hoped to collect the conversational subjects of the camp. It was already divided into red-ink headings—the life of the camp, gossip about visitors, sex, the films, politics, occupational talk, sports, clothes, home life, and so on. The relative frequencies of these subjects, worked out to two decimal places, would help to round

off the picture of holiday-camp life.

But the Mad Hatter, whether he was lunatic, practical joker or deliberate sabotageur, was certainly going to falsify such statistics. The tables were all agog with him, and Paul noticed how quickly heads were raised and a brief, expectant silence fell whenever a member of the staff entered the dining-hall. What is Captain Wise going to do about it? was the main theme, worked out with many variations of inquisitiveness, flippancy, indignation, pessimism or wild fancy. One thing the visitors were evidently going to do about it: they had no intention of starting off upon the treasure-hunt severally: single individuals would be far too vulnerable a mark for the Hatter.

"I don't care what the rules are. I'm not starting off alone, Leonard, so you can take it or leave it. If you don't *want* to partner me, of course," said Miss Janice Mears archly, "I expect I can find another gentleman."

"Oh, I'll come. Anything for a quiet life. But suppose *I*'m the Mad Hatter?"

"Get on, Leonard! Suppose I'm Greta Garbo!"

That's another interesting thing, reflected Paul. They've at last been forced to take the existence of the Hatter seriously, but they are still unable to envisage him as possibly one of their own acquaintance. A simple defence-mechanism at work, of course: if that were broken down, we should have all the conditions for panic.…

There were no further manifestations that morning. After lunch the treasure-hunters, about a hundred strong, assembled outside the sports pavilion. Sally, sensibly dressed in blue slacks and a blue jersey, got away to a good start with Paul. She led the way round the copse, past Pets' Corner, over the dilapidated stone wall and uphill.

"Where are we going?"

"To the hermit's wood," she said, showing Paul her clue.

"Isn't it time you explained what——?"

"Wait. I want to be sure we're well away from the others."

How women revel in petty secrecy, thought Paul indulgently: it's just a way of exercising power; and it always defeats itself sooner or later: the Pandora complex.

The turf on this rising slope was springy under their feet. Thyme and harebells grew here, and the sky above them gave back the misty, delicate blue of the harebells. Paul, unusually charmed by the afternoon's beauty, paused to look back over the sea that fitted snugly, like jig-saw pieces, into the indentations of cliff below.

"Come on," said Sally, tugging at his sleeve. "We've got to hurry. You can admire Nature some other time."

"I don't admire Nature. I think she's capricious, wasteful and a deceiver. Just like a woman."

"But she's beautiful and you can't get away from her. All right—don't look so scared. I'm not going to lead you astray, you solemn old misog—— What is it?"

"Misogynist. You do love bossing people about, don't you, Sally?"

"Well, you oughtn't to be yearning over Nature. You ought to be admiring me."

"Oh, I do. I think you're very pretty."

"Jeepers-creepers! Put some conviction into your voice, my pet. 'I think you're very pretty'"—she rendered an exact imitation of his stilted, reluctant tones. "I can see I shall have to educate you."

"Heaven preserve me!"

"Well, you needn't be nasty."

Sally looked crestfallen, her lip pouting. She went from mood to mood like a

butterfly. The next moment she was dragging Paul down under shelter of a stone wall, as though she had seen a sniper in the wood that broadened out into the distance, its apex resting on the road opposite them.

"Here we are alone," she sang under her breath, "out of cigarettes … Yes, that must be the bush in my clue. See those white flowers. They're Old-man's-beard."

"Well, aren't we going to look for the second clue? It'll be hidden in that bush somewhere."

"No, my pet, we're not. Let's sit down and be comfortable, and your auntie will tell you a nice story." Their backs were against the stone wall; her shoulder pressed confidingly on his. "We came a short cut. The other people who've got this clue will be pounding along the road. We'll let them go past."

"You're certainly a mistress of suspense."

"Do you know who lives in that wood?"

"Some hermit or other, isn't it?"

"Yes. And do you know who he is?"

"John the Baptist?"

"He's the Mad Hatter," Sally whispered.

Paul stared at her incredulously for a moment. Then he laughed, and said:

"Why, of course, how stupid of me! I've often seen him skulking about the camp in his long, grey beard. A quite unmistakable figure."

"Are we sarcastic or are we sarcastic? Just listen a minute. Teddy told me all about the hermit. Before they built the camp here, he used to live alone in a sort of shack near the cliffs. He was a simple-lifer—a bit daft, but quite harmless. He'd been here for years, and the chap who owned the land let him have his little patch rent-free. And then—golly, what's that?"

Paul swivelled round and popped his head over the top of the wall. "It's all right," he said presently: "only some of the treasure-hunters. You've chosen rather a public place for your narrative, haven't you?"

"I wanted to be here so that we could see if the hermit's at home. He'll come bouncing out at these people if he is. Well, the chap who owned the land lost his money and had to sell. That was about three years ago. Nobody'd buy it, though, till the Wonderland people came along and decided it'd be a good place for a holiday camp. There was a terrific row on the local council about it, apparently."

"I bet there was. Beauty-snobs versus main-chancers."

Sally glanced at him, puzzled for a moment. It occurred to Paul that Esmeralda Jones would have taken the point at once—and that Sally looked rather plain when she was out of her depth.

"Some of the council said they ought not to allow the camp, because it would spoil the look of the countryside—the coast just here is supposed to be a beauty spot—and would bring a lot of riff-raff into the district. People like you and me, my pet. They were the retired colonels and landowners who said that. And others said the camp wouldn't spoil the countryside, because look at the lovely plans Wonderland had sent in, and it would give employment and help the shopkeepers and the rates and so on."

"And they were the local builders and shopkeepers who said that, no doubt," Paul commented.

"Well, anyway, the council was torn between two opinions——"

"My dear, it sounds like something out of the Acts of the Apostles!"

"Oh, do shut up! Some bird from London was called in to give evidence, and a sort of commission was held. You know—people giving evidence. The hermit was

one of them. He fairly went up in smoke about the camp, apparently: said it would make Sodom and Gomorrah look like a spinsters' knitting-bee, and only over his dead body, and all that. Well, finally the pro-camp side won. Wonderland bought the park and a chunk of the cliffs and foreshore, and the poor old hermit was evicted. It took quite a posse to shift him, too. But Hermie was an obstinate old boy—just like you, my pet. He settled down again on the nearest spot he could to the camp——"

"Protesting, doubtless, his need for lebensraum."

"—Which was this wood, and proceeded to make a nuisance of himself."

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Paul thoughtfully.

"He certainly did. The first summer camp started, he used to sprinkle nails all over the road here, Teddy, says, so that the camp bus got punctures. Things like that. They had to get an injunction or whatever it is against him in the end. That put a spoke in him, and he's been pretty quiet ever since, except for popping out of the wood and gnashing his teeth at the Wonderland visitors every now and then. The management keep pretty dark about him—when I was here last year I never even heard of his existence—because they can't do anything more: the chap who previously owned all the land, still owns the wood, and he said it was O.K. by him for the hermit to live there. As I say, he kept quiet, *till this week*."

Sally paused dramatically. The voices of the last pair of treasure-seekers gabbled away into silence. There was nothing now to be heard but faint, intermittent stirrings within the wood across the road.

"But, my dear child, it's absurd. Granted this hermit has a better motive than any we've yet heard of for making trouble in the camp. But remember the duckings. Somebody'd be bound to have noticed if a long grey beaver was swimming around."

"I've thought of that——"

"And then there's the green disks that everyone at the camp has to wear. They're meant just for that purpose—to ensure that no unauthorised person gate-crashes on the Wonderland amenities. You have to give them back at the end of your visit. How on earth could he get hold of one?"

"Oh, that'd be easy. People lose them sometimes. He probably picked up one that'd been dropped near here. I dare say it gave him the whole idea of Mad-Hattering the camp."

"And how do you explain away his beard?"

"It's false."

"But——"

"Do *listen*! He cut off his beard, went clean-shaven to a shop and bought a long false beard, reappeared as the same old hermit. Whenever he wants to enter the camp, he just takes off his beard, has a general clean-up, puts on more respectable clothes."

"But he must be fairly old to have had a grey beard at all. A man as old as that would show up in the camp."

"Why should he? There's quite a sprinkling of oldish people here. And amongst five hundred of us he'd not be particularly noticed. Everyone's very free and easy in the camp, and they're not here long enough for either themselves or the staff to begin picking out individuals much. If you've got a green disk on, you're O.K."

"Yes, there's something in that. But look here, he's an *old* man. An old man wouldn't be strong enough to hold Captain Wise under water."

"But he's a strong old man. I told you, he's a simple-lifer. Eats acorns and things. And Teddy says he walks into Apple-stock—that's eight miles away—once or twice a week, and brings back food in a sack."

"Acorns, I suppose? And, if he frequents Applestock, he's not a hermit."

"—So he must be hefty enough."

The hysterical laughter of a jay broke from the wood. A ladybird was climbing diligently along Sally's blue-trousered leg. Paul watched it, his heart stirring uneasily; he tried to shut out from his mind the feel of Sally's hand as it brushed against his, to postpone somehow—if only by absorbing his eye in the ladybird's progress—the full consciousness of what her words implied.

"Well," he said at last, "there may be something in it. It'd be worth suggesting to Captain Wise."

"Yes. We're going to find out a bit more first, though, if we can."

"How d'you mean?"

"We're going to find the hermit's lair—or whatever it is a hermit lives in—and see if he's left any clues."

"No, damn it, we can't do that. Supposing he's there?"

"If he's there, we'll just say we've lost our way, and sheer off. You're not afraid of a dotty old man, are you?"

"No, of course not," said Paul, too quickly.

"Well, I am. That's partly why I came. When I opened my envelope with the first clue this morning, I was scared stiff. You see—oh, I haven't time to explain: but, when you're afraid, you ought always to go and face it out straight away. And I'll feel quite safe with you."

"That's all very well," Paul tried to turn it off lightly. "But I've got a trespassing-phobia. I——"

"Oh, come on. He doesn't *own* the wood. Anyway, all these people tramping around are sure to have driven him off."

Sally vaulted the stone wall, crossed the road and entered the wood, Paul following stiffly behind her. The wood, as is the way of woods, closed at once behind them—enclosed them in a silence which had become more profound yet queerly attentive, as though forces lurked there—neutral at present—but ready any moment to take offence and action. Paul was obsessed by a feeling that this had happened before, or was going to happen again. Each leaf, each sun-dappled space of the wood's floor, concealed an obscure threat. The silence here was so eternal that past and future seemed to have no meaning: you felt compelled to challenge the silence by breaking more noisily through the tangle of undergrowth and whippy branches across the path. Pausing, her hand on his shoulder, to let him unfasten a bramble shoot that had hooked her jersey, Sally said:

"You're pale. I believe you really are windy." Her voice was childish: not contemptuous; purely inquisitive.

"I hate trespassing," he answered stubbornly.

The wood was much larger than they had imagined. Little, overgrown paths hatched and cross-hatched it. You could walk for ever without finding what you wanted. A pulpy, acrid smell of vegetation rose all round them as they peered into the wood's dark recesses: the play of sunlight and shadow deluded them, creating a dozen mirages that might have been the hermit's camouflaged home.

"Oh, I'm sinking in!" the girl cried suddenly. Paul reached out, took her under the arms, and lifted her out of the patch of black mud.

"It's a bog. You should look where you're going," he said irritably, feeling the tremor of her body as she leant against him for a moment.

"Look, Paul! Look!"

She was pointing towards the farther edge of the bog, where a footprint—not hers

—was plainly evident.

"That's him," she said. "We can't be far away now. I'm going to jump across."

"I'll carry you. Or perhaps we can find a way round."

"Would you like to carry me, Paul Pry?" she said in that childish voice. "We'd both sink in together, and nothing of us would be left but two poor little top-knots. Wouldn't it be romantic?"

"It'd be loathsome. You'd better jump."

They both leaped across the intervening bog. Sally whispered:

"Isn't it exciting! I've always wanted to be in the Secret Service. A beautiful female agent, like Mata Hari. Look, there's a bit of mud he left behind. And the ferns are bruised here—this is the way."

A few moments later they emerged into a tiny clearing. A shack stood there, weather-worn, chinks stuffed with paper, its tattered roofing of tarred felt crowned by a piece of stove-pipe stuck out at a drunken angle like the clay pipe from a stage Irishman's hat. Now they had found it, it did not seem sinister—only shabby and rather pathetic. Though there was no evidence that the recluse was not at home, Sally walked round to the front of the shack without hesitation and peered in at the single, broken-paned window.

It was too dark. They could see nothing. Sally tried the door, expecting it to be locked, but it creaked open at once.

"There you are," said Paul, irritable with relief. "If he had any guilty secrets, he'd be certain to keep that door locked. Now we can go home, thank God."

"Not yet. Keep guard, if you're afraid to come in."

Paul stood beside the doorway, one eye apprehensively on the wood, glancing from time to time at Sally, who was rummaging amongst the rag-and-sack bed, the old newspapers, the rusty cooking utensils that ministered to the simple-lifer's life.

"It's no good. I can't find anything. Phoo, they're smelly!"

"Now perhaps you'll be satisfied."

"Don't be a wet blanket!" Sally looked quickly round the cabin. There seemed no possible hiding-place. Unless—— She poked her hand up into the cavity in the roof that held the stove-pipe. Her hand came out again, sooty and empty. In reaching up she had stood tiptoe on the earthen floor, just where it was blackened in a circle by the mark of many fires. It took her a few seconds to realise that the floor had a different feel just here. Then she was on her knees, scrabbling amongst the litter of ashes, feeling the hidden bricks that made a firm fireplace beneath, lifting out the bricks, lifting out something that lay beneath them.

She took it towards the light. Paul was peering uneasily at her. It was a metal box. She opened it, pulled out a sheaf of yellowed press cuttings: they were reports from the local paper of the controversy that had been waged over the Wonderland holiday camp. Impatiently she flipped through them. They told her nothing she did not know already. But the last cutting seemed very fat, and when she shook it out a number of photographs fell from it.

"Look, Paul," she said, "look!"

They were aerial photographs, and one of them presented—in clear and sunlit detail—the buildings, the grounds, the whole lay-out of Wonderland.

VIII

"NO," SALLY WAS saying a minute later. "We must put them back exactly as we found them. Otherwise he'll be on his guard."

It was she now who showed anxiety, as though that photograph of Wonderland had brought another picture too clearly before her eyes—the picture of a grey-bearded man already plodding towards them through the wood, a Mad Hatter full of malice. She put the metal box in the cavity, carefully laid the bricks over it and covered them again with the ashes and charred sticks.

"'Exactly as we found them'?" asked Paul. "What about those photographs? Are they wrapped up in the right order?"

"Oh hell! I don't know—they all tumbled out—let's hope he doesn't notice it. Come on, Paul, I've got the jitters."

She gave the shack a last look round. Closing its door, they plunged back into the wood. Sally took his hand: hers was blackened from the chimney and sooty ashes, cold even in the midsummer heat.

"Oh God, I hope we get out of the wood without meeting him."

"What's come over you, Sally? He wouldn't—ssh!"

A strange, rusty, tuneless humming sounded through the trees. The pair were frozen still, on the edge of the boggy patch: they dared not move; if they turned off the path into the undergrowth, the noise would betray their flight. This is what the rabbit feels like, thought Paul, as the ragged, grey-bearded figure, bent under a heavy sack, humming like a rusty clockwork, advanced upon them. Now they were confronting each other. At least, the bog was between them.

"Good afternoon," said Sally, a little tremulously, holding her dirty hands behind her back.

"Who are you? Where have you come from? This wood is private, don't you understand?"

The voice was soft, yet harsh. His words came out reluctantly, as though the recluse had lost the habit of human speech. The dark, smoked glasses over the grey beard gave him the unnatural aspect of an effigy that children have strung together out of oddments from a cobwebbed attic.

"We got lost," said Sally. "Can you tell us the quickest way back to the camp, please?"

"The holiday camp?" That halting, unused voice rose to a sort of crow's croaking. "You come from the camp? Get out of here! Get out, I tell you!"

"We will, if you'll let us pass."

Sally made a move, as if to jump across the bog. It seemed to infuriate the old scarecrow still more. He released his sack and, with a rather dreadful animation, began flapping his arms and making little runs at them, stopping short on the bog's margin each time. Sally could not stand any more of this: that crow's voice, those flapping black arms—there seemed no reason why he shouldn't leave the ground and flap across the bog at them. She turned and fled back up the path, Paul close behind her …

The treasure-hunt was not yet over when they returned to Wonderland. Sally had been unusually silent on the way back, and her silence seemed to convey to him that he had been inadequate, a disappointment.

"Well, What could we have done?" he said at last. "Arrested him on the spot? We haven't *proved* anything yet."

"You needn't have run away like that."

"You ran away too."

"That's different."

"I see. Women and children first. I ought to have fought a rearguard action, I suppose? And you ought to have brought your Teddy Wise with you, if you wanted a nice, story-book hero on the spot," Paul replied bitterly.

"Oh, let it go, let it go."

It was with considerable relief that he narrated the episode to Esmeralda Jones, whom he found in the manager's office. Here was a woman who didn't regulate her life by the canons of behaviour laid down in twopenny library romances: a sophisticated, intelligent woman, definitely his type.

"That photograph of the camp is suggestive, of course," he said, encouraged by her sober attention and dispassionate gaze. "And he did look rather—well, rather disguised: the beard might have been a false one, but all beards look false nowadays. Anyway, he obviously can't haunt the camp in those frightful rags he was wearing, and we didn't find any other clothes in the shack."

"He might easily have a cache somewhere else, Paul. No, I think we should go into this thoroughly: you can't get away from it—he's got by far the best motive we've struck so far."

"Who has?" asked Captain Wise, entering with a sheaf of papers under his arm, his brother behind him.

Paul told them the gist of the story, adding— "the tricks played so far certainly seem in character with a half-crazed, spiteful, rather childish old man, but I still think——"

"It'd be a good thing for us if these tricks turned out to be engineered by someone outside the camp, don't you think, Miss Jones? I wonder could we let drop a few hints pointing that way. It'd revive the *esprit-de-corps* a bit."

"Are the visitors beginning to check out, then?" asked Paul.

"There's no real exodus started yet," Captain Wise replied evasively. "Oh, by the way, the Mad Hatter has filled in a questionnaire paper."

"*What?*" Paul exclaimed.

Captain Wise passed one of the sheets over to him. It was signed, in block capitals, "THE MAD HATTER," and he had answered the questionnaire in a lamentably frivolous manner: as for example:

Q. vi I am Trotsky in disguise.
Q. vii Makes things more exciting, of course, you silly chumps.
Q. viii Call in the military, the British navy, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Old Moore if you like, but it won't do you any good.
Q. ix Kidnap Miss Jones.

"Not sure he isn't right there," said Captain Wise, laying a finger on this last item. "Can't imagine anything that'd disorganise the camp more. We'd better give you a bodyguard, Miss Jones."

"You're not taking this seriously, are you?" Paul asked.

"Bless your heart, no. As it happens, three different people have replied over the name of the Mad Hatter. That sort of joke's contagious."

Teddy Wise who, resplendent in white flannels, had been sitting on his brother's

desk juggling with a paper-weight, an india-rubber and a golf ball, swivelled round quickly.

"'Contagious.' There you are. That's just what I've been telling you all along. Some bird plays a practical joke. A lot of to-do is made about it. Several other birds —neurotic, I suppose you'd call 'em—feel they have to compete too. Like those slashings up in Yorkshire a few years ago. Chap slashes a wench—probably got a very good reason for it: then several other chaps hear, the call independently and sharpen up their razors and totter around slashing out right and left quite regardless."

Captain Wise tapped his teeth with his gold pencil, gazing at Paul: "What d'you think of that theory, Perry?"

"I'm not sure," Paul replied slowly. "I suppose the flaw is that it was announced over the loud-speakers and then a notice put up on the board. That suggests a single individual behind the jokes."

"I know I'm not awfully bright," said Teddy; "but *who* does it? The loud-speaker Johnny does the duckings and the first treacle act——"

"And somebody else, happening to have a tin of treacle by him, decides to doctor the piano?" said Miss Jones ironically.

"Oh well, chap A does the piano as well as the tennis-balls. Then chap B weighs in with strychnine——"

"Of which, by a fortunate coincidence, he happens to have brought a supply in his suitcase."

"All right, all right, all right. I resign." At the door Teddy Wise halted a moment. "I say. *If* the hermit is the Mad Hatter, and *if* he suspects Miss Thistlethwaite and Perry here of having got the drop on him—well, it won't be too good for the wench, will it?"

"You'd better run along and guard her then, Teddy," said his brother abstractedly. "Tell the staff to keep a special lookout for unauthorised people in the grounds. Especially for an oldish man, not wearing a beard, with a harsh voice——"

"—And otherwise answering to the description of Hermann the Hermit. O.K., boss, we'll set the mighty organisation to work."

"Miss Jones and I have been through these questionnaires," said Captain Wise as if there had been no comic interlude. "If you'd like to take 'em off now—Fertile imaginations, some of these people have."

"Shall I have tea sent to your chalet straight away?" Miss Jones inquired with a demure glance.

"Thanks very much."

Back in his room, Paul began to collate in a note-book the answers to the first part of the questionnaire. Voices of returned treasure-hunters came to his ears:

"I got ever so dirty, trying to——"

"Did you have the flag-pole clue, too? I don't know how they think of them.…"

"It wasn't fair. Gertie and Bob had a much easier …"

"Well, somebody had to win it.…"

"My friend got stung by something."

"Adder, I expect. She was stung by an adder, which made her much sadder, and ——"

"Give over, do, that's me you're pinching.…"

"Sally went off with that Mass Observer gentleman. D'you think——?"

Presently the last voice died away, and Paul could work without interruption. After an hour, the results of the first five questions were tabulated. Three hundred

and seventy-one papers had been returned, a very fair proportion considering the distractions the visitors had had. Paul sat back and reviewed the results. He noted with special interest that they had voted in almost equal proportions for gregariousness, luxury and cheapness, and novelty, as the reason for preferring a holiday camp to lodgings at an ordinary resort; that only 39 % believed that the luxury of Wonderland would dissatisfy them with their normal environment; that only 11% ever felt a desire for solitude, whereas 83% approved of the extent to which their recreations were organised in Wonderland.

For once, though, he found it difficult to concentrate on statistics. An unaccountable depression, a vague dissatisfaction overcast his mind: these percentages, these carefully worked out plans of investigation—they seemed now a grasping of the shadow and missing of the substance. Yet what substance was there in this unreal microcosm that lay about him? How could you map out a life so fluid, so erratic? In this camp there were five hundred people: they did not stay long enough to form special habits; each of them was a particle, drifting from one recreation to another, forming up with one group of particles, then as lightly detaching itself and drifting towards a second. The older people, and those who had brought families of children, did stick together more consistently: but for the majority the camp was like a huge children's party where you romped incuriously with anyone and everyone, often not even knowing the names of your playmates of the moment, your games organised and benevolently supervised by a few rather shadowy grown-ups.

It was this, Paul realised, which rendered so difficult not only his own research but the management's efforts to lay their hand on the Mad Hatter. A feeling of impatience, of contempt almost, for the raw material of his study came over him. Such a feeling, he knew, was deadly sin for an Observer: and besides, though he would reject with contumely "organised games" in the public-school sense, he approved of them theoretically when he could see them as "mass recreation" in a holiday camp. Yet the feeling of impatience persisted. There was that puritan hidden deep within him, which was exacerbated by the spectacle of so many people irresponsibly enjoying themselves. At first he had liked the sensation of being outside it all—the impartial, detached, observing machine. Now, he just felt shut out, a figure prowling resentfully around on the outside of a magic circle.

There was a knock at the door and Sally Thistlethwaite entered.

"Hallo," she said, peering with frank curiosity at his note-books. "The great man at work."

"Hallo."

"What's the matter? Your face is as long as a wet week. Come and play something."

"I'm busy."

"That means you're expecting the Jones along, I suppose."

"You can suppose what you like."

"Won't his home-work come out right then?" she said, peering over his shoulder.

"Don't be so childish."

Sally went out at once, slamming the door behind her. He could hear her calling out to Teddy Wise. A moment's irrational panic seized him: they were both coming back to bait him: he remembered things that had happened at school: or perhaps she would set the nit-witted tough on him. He slipped quickly out of his chalet and walked away towards the main building.

Furious now with himself and everyone else, he wandered through the various

playrooms. In one, a table-tennis competition was proceeding: in another, Mr. Thistlethwaite was playing billiards—or rather, with hieratic gestures, blessing a large break on which his opponent was engaged: in a third, several parties of young people were noisily occupied with pin-tables, darts and shove-halfpenny. Paul watched them for a little, vaguely aware that the semi-official position which his questionnaire had given him in the camp somehow kept him outside their circle. They grinned at him, friendly enough, but at the same time their attitude was a little self-conscious—as though he were carrying a portable microphone with him and broadcasting their fun as a feature programme to the world.

Paul wandered outside again, past the tennis-courts, over to the fun-fair. This was another project by the Wonderland directors to go one better than all existing holiday camps. It was particularly popular with the children, for it contained slides, bumper-cars, a merry-go-round, a coco-nut shy, swings and the like. At the moment, however, it was comparatively deserted, since the gong had just rung for the children's six o'clock supper. A group of adults stood at the end of the shooting gallery, and it was evident from their shrieks of laughter that fun was being had by all.

Walking up to them, Paul found that Mr. Morley was the cause of their merriment. Beside the ordinary target practice, the shooting gallery provided more dramatic sport: a luridly coloured jungle panorama from behind which, if you inserted a penny in a slot, cardboard lions, tigers, giraffes, rhinoceroses and wild boar emerged and moved with spasmodic jerks across your field of vision. Albert Morley, squinting horribly down the barrel of a Winchester .22 repeater, was attempting to pick off these cardboard fauna. The shikari, one had to admit, was enjoying singularly ill luck; for the game always seemed to take one of their concerted leaps a fraction of a second before he fired. However, even if they had remained stationary, it was doubtful whether Mr. Morley would have hit one: his habit of shutting tight his eyes just as he pressed the trigger did not conduce to good marksmanship.

Paul soon perceived the reason for this uncanny sense of anticipation on the part of the big game. Each time Albert Morley prepared to fire, the group behind him glanced towards the side of the booth. Teddy Wise stood there, carefully watching Mr. Morley's trigger finger: as it flexed, Teddy jerked a small handle which operated the cardboard animals. It was evident that Mr. Morley, a very deliberate marksman, had already used up his pennyworth of sport, and Teddy was manipulating the jungle effects by means of a handle normally kept locked.

It's odd, reflected Paul as he watched this performance distastefully, that you cannot go on laughing at someone beyond a certain length of time without your laughter turning malicious, going bad on you. It had started as clean fun: Teddy had probably unlocked the handle and given it a turn in a spirit of generosity, so that Albert could have a few more shots after his pennyworth was exhausted. But the crowd had spotted him, secretly egged him on, and Teddy could never resist applause. And now they were all laughing in a different way. It was not pleasant. Even Teddy looked rather apologetic, when Mr. Morley had finished shooting and they all explained to him why his bag amounted to nothing.

Albert Morley, indeed, came out of it best. He blinked uncertainly, looking from Teddy to the others, blushed, ducked his head once or twice with that odd little mannerism of his, then beamed all round, declaring that he wasn't much of a shot and ought to have tried some target practice before going out after the big game. Yes, Mr. Morley could always be relied upon to take things in good part—to turn a

joke sweet again, as you might say. Taking up another rifle, he moved across to the target alley. Teddy Wise, a little ashamed, no doubt, of his thoughtless prank, took Albert in hand, showing him how to aim and how to squeeze the trigger without jerking the rifle: but the shots still only found the outermost circle of the target, Paul noticed before he moved away.

On his way back to the main building he was confronted by the two girls he had sat next to at the concert. Phyllis Arnold was looking more awkward and unhealthy than ever: her friend Janice had to prod her forward and act as spokesman.

"Oh, Mr. Perry, pardon us intruding," she said breathlessly, "but I think Phyll—Miss Arnold ought to see a doctor."

"Well, there's one here. The camp doctor. You'd find him——"

Janice Mears drew him aside, leaving her friend standing dismally on the gravel path, hands tucked into the wide sleeves of her white tennis-coat.

"I know," she said. "But she's so stubborn. She's a Christian Scientist, sort of. I thought perhaps you might be able to persuade her. She's taken quite a fancy to you, see?"

Oh lord! thought Paul. This is preposterous. Couldn't she be content with the Left Book Club?

"What's the matter with her?" he asked.

"She's got blisters. Ever so big. Here, Phyllis, show Mr. Perry your blisters."

Flushing painfully, the girl came up to him, uncrossed her arms and pulled back the sleeves of her coat. On the forearms there were several blisters, nearly as big as golf-balls.

"Good God!" exclaimed Paul in a shocked voice. "How on earth did you get these? When did they come?"

The girl began to snivel wretchedly. Her friend spoke for her again.

"They came up quite soon after she got back from the treasure-hunt."

"You've not been experimenting with mustard gas, by any chance?" Paul asked lightly.

"Why, Mr. Perry, of course I haven't," said Phyllis Arnold. "Whatever made you think——?"

"They're the sort of blisters it gives you, that's all. You must have burnt yourself. Primus or something, was it?"

"But I didn't burn myself. They just came."

"Oh well, never mind, the doctor'll soon put them right. Shall we drop in on him now?"

"I wouldn't care to see a doctor, thank you very much all the same," said Miss Arnold, with the sheepish, self-martyring expression of the weakly obstinate.

Paul thought quickly.

"I quite understand," he said. "One must respect your convictions. But I think you ought to let the doctor see. There might conceivably be some epidemic of these things, and we ought to have them under observation at the start. Think of all the other people in the camp. After all, you needn't have them treated, if you don't want."

The girl accepted this unscientific and far from ingenuous piece of pleading: she was in evident pain as they walked towards the doctor's chalet.

"This is Miss Arnold," said Paul, when Doctor Holford opened the door to them. "We thought——"

"Yes," broke in Janice Mears. "She's got some awful blisters. Mr. Perry says they're from mustard-gas."

“Don’t be absurd. I was only joking.” Paul looked distinctly uncomfortable. The young doctor gave him a cool, appraising look, invited them in, and inspected the girl’s forearms.

“Hmm,” he said at last. “Nasty-looking chaps, aren’t they? But nothing to be alarmed about. We’ll just let out the fluid and put on some dry dressings.”

Seeing Miss Arnold on the point of making her protest, Paul moved towards the door: he didn’t want to become involved in a controversy about Christian Science.

“Perhaps you could call in again, Perry, in about quarter of an hour’s time?” said the doctor quietly, not looking up.

“Certainly.”

When the time was up, Paul returned to the doctor’s chalet. Phyllis Arnold and her friend had already left. Dr. Holford offered him a drink and a cigarette. He came straight to the point.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Perry, how do you come to be acquainted with the effects of mustard-gas?”

“A friend of mine at Cambridge, a chemist, was experimenting with the stuff and got a trace of it on his hand. But, look here, you’re not really suggesting——?”

“I don’t mind telling you I’m puzzled about those blisters. The fact is, they do exactly resemble mustard-gas ones. Of course, it’s fantastic: but the girl can’t give any account of them. ‘They just came,’ she says. One wouldn’t think twice about it, but for these other things that’ve been happening in the camp.”

“But, surely you have to spray the stuff. It’d be impracticable——”

“Inside the camp, perhaps. But don’t forget the treasure-hunt.”

“If it was done somewhere along the treasure-trail, more than one person would have been affected.”

“I’m quite aware of that.” Like many of his profession, Dr. Holford disapproved of laymen infringing upon its mysteries. He went on, in a more distant voice,” And, by the way, I don’t think it was wise on your part to mention mustard-gas in front of those two young ladies. I did my best to pooh-pooh the notion; otherwise it’d have been all round the camp by now.”

It soon was. It would have taken a stronger-minded person than Miss Janice Mears to keep such a good thing to herself. As soon as she had persuaded Phyllis Arnold to lie down, she sought out her particular boy-friend of the moment and told all. In half an hour, so ripe for rumour had Wonderland become, half the camp knew that the Mad Hatter had struck again—this time, with poison-gas. The casualty list quickly mounted from one girl with blisters to a dozen, a score, fifty visitors at death’s door. The evening dew was falling, but its healing properties were lost to-day: a different, a poisonous dew was in people’s minds. They glanced at each other doubtfully, furtively examined their own flesh, like men in a plague-stricken town.

At this point Mr. Thistlethwaite gathered together all the members of the Sports Committee he could find, and they went in a body to the manager’s office. Captain Wise, who had already heard the rumours, was evidently as bewildered as the rest of them. The mustard-gas theory would no doubt be soon disproved: Dr. Holford was an able young man and he had every confidence in him: but meanwhile the damage was being done. Did they not think it was time for him to call in the police? Miss Jones suggested that this would only heighten the general panic; but Captain Wise, perplexed and irritable, snubbed her unmercifully.

Then, after a good deal of heated but fruitless discussion, Mr. Thistlethwaite took the floor. Let a compromise be made, he pronounced weightily: they did not want the publicity that would be attached to police intervention, but at the same time they

could no longer remain inactive in the face of a menace that struck at the heart of the community. Let them employ the services of a private detective. He himself, as it happened, numbered one such among his clientèle: a thorough gentleman—that went without saying—and a brilliant investigator at the top of his profession: a Mr. Strangeways. Mr. Thistlethwaite might be able to induce him to take up the case, if he happened to be at liberty just now. The committee approved of this decision, and in a few minutes Miss Jones was putting through a trunk call to London.

PART II

Mr. Thistlethwaite Measures Up

IX

THE NEXT MORNING, after breakfast, Mr. Thistlethwaite took Paul Perry aside. They walked over towards the bowling-green, where already some of the older visitors were getting down to their sober rites, and sat on the grass terrace above. Mr. Thistlethwaite, evidently full of matter, was in no hurry to release it: the leisurely movements of the players, their no less deliberate badinage, the morning sunlight that had all the day before it—everything in sight suggested, like Mr. Thistlethwaite's own drill-clad bulk, *otium cum dignitate*.

"It was a relief, sir, that the fancy-dress dance last night passed off without incident."

"It was indeed."

"Well played, sir! A beautiful wood! I always think, Mr. Perry, that bowls is a peculiarly English game, exercising to the full—as it does—the qualities of patience, good temper, forethought and harmless rivalry. It is, too—correct me if I am wrong—the one national pastime which has not yet succumbed to the taint of professionalism."

"What about polo?"

"I was speaking, sir, of democratic pastimes," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite with some severity. "Polo is a rich man's game. None the worse for that, you may say. Many of my gentlemen indulged in the sport—hard knocks and no ill-feeling—a manly game, without question. But not open to the masses, and therefore not to be specified as a typical English sport. No, sir."

"I suppose bowls does exemplify our national character," said Paul, playing up to the fantasy. "Making a virtue out of bias, for one thing. Reaching our objective by a devious route. That is what foreigners call 'British hypocrisy': but we know better: we know it is bowls."

"You are rallying me, sir, I perceive," Mr. Thistlethwaite replied good-humouredly. "Ah well, who would imagine, gazing upon this innocent scene, that the shadow of death overhangs it?"

"Who indeed?" Paul glanced at his companion's face, and saw that it had indeed assumed a funebrial expression. "But surely you don't think this Mad Hatter person would——"

"The Angel of Death may hover, sir. It is for us to ensure that he does not swoop."

"It sounds as if we needed an anti-aircraft gun more than a private detective."

Mr. Thistlethwaite waved this aside with an indulgent gesture—a gesture misinterpreted by Albert Morley, who was walking on the far side of the bowling-green, as a royal invitation. He came round to them, bobbed anxiously once or twice, and sat down on the grass nearby. It was typical of his indecisiveness of mind that he neither sat near enough to include himself in the group nor far enough away for them to be able to ignore him.

Mr. Thistlethwaite eyed the little man speculatively for a moment, then addressed himself to Paul.

"We were speaking of death, sir," he pronounced in sombre tones. Mr. Morley started, his head shying away from them like a jibbing horse's.

"Death," continued Mr. Thistlethwaite, "the greatest Demagogue of all. Hem. Now, sir, as one trained to accurate observation, you are at a great advantage in

estimating the psychological reactions, the general temper and morale of a community. Would you say that there has been any marked change amongst us here since yesterday?"

"Well, I think people are feeling a bit ashamed of the panic they got into last night. And, when people feel that kind of relief and humiliation, they're apt to take out their irritation on someone else."

"Quite. A sagacious observation, if I may say so. People are looking for a victim, a scapegoat. Pray proceed."

"There's also a noticeable closing of the ranks. *Esprit de corps* is rearing its ugly head."

"Not perhaps the terms in which I should express it myself, but undeniably true. The presence of a public enemy in our midst, which at first created mild annoyance and curiosity, then mutual resentment and suspicion, has now brought us to a third stage. Those who were loudest in clamouring that the management should take action, and in blaming its inefficiency, are now the first"—Mr. Thistlethwaite, with a benign nod of the head, sanctioned his own colloquialism—"the first to rally round. Miss Gardiner will serve as one instance. Captain Wise—I say this from inside knowledge—is being positively embarrassed with offers of assistance. Aside from which, the generality of visitors, who might well have been expected to—ah, as young Mr. Wise would put it—to clock out in droves, are now feeling it a point of honour to stay on and outface the aggressor. Let him beware," Mr. Thistlethwaite concluded, "who thinks to twist the lion's tail too far."

"Aren't we wandering rather far from the subject of death?" asked Paul.

His companion's eye followed the course of a wood which, carrying acute bias, swept up the green, curled round the obstructing screen of bowls and came gently to rest against the jack.

"Sir," he said, "however far we wander, we cannot get away from death. However, let us by all means return to our muttons. My argument tends towards this conclusion: suppose the Mad Hatter's outrages were aimed at demoralising the visitors and thus damaging Wonderland itself: this effect has signally failed of achievement; the miscreant cannot fail to have realised it by now, and we might therefore expect a cessation of hostilities on his part, especially as it has been announced in public that the management has called in a trained investigator."

"Well, that'll be a relief for everyone."

Mr. Thistlethwaite raised a minatory finger. "But this hypothesis may be wrong. It is possible that these outrages are aimed finally at a single individual."

"Oh, but surely, I mean to say——" protested Albert Morley, who had been bouncing about on the grass in evident impatience.

"Allow me to pursue my argument. Let us suppose that I have a private motive for wishing to murder you, Mr. Morley——"

Albert stared at him, pale, transfixed, horrified.

"—or vice versa," conceded Mr. Thistlethwaite. "How easy to carry out a series of practical jokes, the victims chosen at random; and then, having established an atmosphere of practical joking, to launch an attack upon the real victim. This would appear to be no more than another joke—one which unfortunately had gone too far. If carefully disguised, it would arouse no suspicion at all of deliberate homicide. What do you say, Mr. Morley?"

"I suppose it's possible. But this motive business—I mean, how could you ever find out——?"

"Yes," said Paul. "Amongst nearly five hundred people, it'd be the devil of a job

to discover who had motives for murdering whom."

"We can eliminate a good many, sir. It is logical to suppose that the criminal worked out his plan of campaign before coming to Wonderland, which means that his prospective victim is not someone he has met since arriving here, but a person acquainted with him in ordinary life."

"You mean, if we could find out which of the visitors knew each other before coming here, the search for the criminal and his victim could be confined to them?"

"Just so. It is possible even that they are of the same family. Most murders are for gain: supposing X murders Y in order to profit by his will, the motive—in ordinary circumstances—is dangerously apparent; the police need not look further than the family circle. But an apparently accidental death, the result of a misplaced practical joke which is itself only one of a series, taking place in a large community, would conceal such a motive most effectively."

"I dare say. But I still don't see how we can find out which of the visitors—apart from those who came with their families—answer your description."

"That's where your own services would be useful, Mr. Perry. You have a semi-official position here, which enables you to ask questions without seeming unwarrantably to intrude into private lives. There is also your questionnaire, on which people were asked to subscribe their names and addresses. An examination of these addresses would yield at least provisional results."

They decided to get to work on the questionnaire papers straight away, though Paul secretly believed that it would do little to narrow down the investigation. Mr. Thistlethwaite, by some strange reaction of mind upon matter, had already assumed the appearance of one of those solid, heavy-jowled, ordinary-looking men under whose photographs in the press you read the legend "Superintendent ——, one of the Big Five, who is in control of the investigation." Only the bowler hat was missing.

It was while they were engaged upon the papers that a man approached Sally, who was sun-bathing on the beach, and began talking to her in the free-and-easy manner of Wonderland. Lying on her stomach, scrabbling her toes into the soft sand, she did not at first give him more than a brief glance. He looked very much like any of the older visitors—grey flannels, sports coat, open-necked shirt, one of those old-young faces whose wrinkles and grey hair are contradicted by clear-cut features and a keen, mobile expression. His voice was pleasant, too—slow, paternal, somehow reassuring. Afterwards, when her mother mildly commented on the way she had conducted herself, Sally could only say that he'd seemed a perfectly inoffensive creature.

The two talked desultorily for a few minutes. Then Sally said:

"Be a sport and rub in some of this sun-tan oil, will you? I can't get at my back."

"You don't look as if you needed any."

"I certainly do. I've got to be a South Sea maiden in the cabaret to-morrow."

As the stranger rubbed in the oil, the conversation drifted round to the Mad Hatter. He had not realised that she was the practical joker's first victim. It must have been a nasty experience, being dragged under the sea. What had it felt like?

Sally chattered away happily. They discussed the other exploits of the Mad Hatter, and the way they had affected the visitors. Presently the stranger rose from his knees, rubbed his hands in a dirty handkerchief, and drifted off. As she looked up to thank him for his ministrations, Sally had subconsciously noticed something which did not come to the front of her mind till the stranger was already nearing the top of the cliff path.

He had not been wearing a Wonderland identity disc, that was it.

Well, of course he wasn't. Lots of people don't wear them down at the beach. Yes, but he wasn't bathing, he had no towel or costume with him. Oh, don't be silly. Yes, and he was an oldish man, grey-haired, and his voice sort of deliberate, like—— But the hermit's voice was husky, hoarse, quite different. That might have been assumed. Suppose it was the hermit, the Mad Hatter. All right, suppose it was; he didn't do you any harm, you poor, nervous ninny. He was very nice and kind. He even——

Sally's eyes fell on the bottle of sun-tan oil, upright in the sand where he had laid it down. She felt cold and hot and cold, as if she were swimming through the layers of chilly and warmer water out there in the sea. She thought she would faint, she wished she could scream, remembering what had happened yesterday to that other girl. Blisters. Mustard-gas, they'd all said, and Captain Wise had publicly denounced the people who spread such a silly rumour. But you could not decontaminate your mind from that rumour just in a few hours.

Oh God, she thought, holding up the bottle, desperately trying to remember how much there had been in it before—— Oh God, supposing it was something else he rubbed into my back, something out of a different bottle.

She shuddered. She could feel his hand again, rubbing gently but very persistently, the hand of that horrible old man who had flapped at them in the wood, the Mad Hatter who poisoned dogs.

In a moment she had braced herself hard against this undertow of panic. You didn't have to rub mustard-gas into people: and, if it had been acid—vitriol, or something like that—she'd have felt it burning at once: and it'd have burnt his hand too. But still, he may still have been the Mad Hatter, drawn back to the scene of his crime. He had no disc, he started talking about the practical joker—in a queer, interested, inquisitive way, almost as though he had not seen the effects of them himself and wanted to gloat over an eye-witness's account.

Sally leapt to her feet and swam out to where Teddy Wise was sitting on a raft. Breathlessly she whispered to him what had happened. His sleepy eyes came wide awake. They swam together, racing for the shore, hurried on their bathing-robes, scrambled up the steep path. Sally had no very clear idea of how they were to find the unknown man amongst all the crowd and buildings of Wonderland, but the mere physical action of keeping up with Teddy's long strides heartened her.

When they approached the main building and the recreation grounds, they discovered—if they had any attention to spare for it—the difference between running through a crowd of strangers and trying to make one's way through a mass of people who have already been tuned up to crisis. A smash-and-grab thief can nearly always get away to a good start, for the shock of his action creates a momentary paralysis in the bystanders. But the Wonderland visitors, who swarmed helpfully or inquiringly round as soon as they saw Teddy Wise and Sally running, made a formidable obstacle. In the end they had to stop while Sally, at Teddy's suggestion, described the appearance of the man on the beach. The visitors then scattered in search of him.

"Listen, Teddy," she said. "If he's the Mad Hatter and going around asking people how they enjoyed his fun, he may be talking to that woman whose dog he killed, or to the girl with blisters. Quick! Which shall we try first?"

They decided for Phyllis Arnold, whom the doctor had ordered to rest in her chalet. It was a sound decision. As they approached the chalet, Sally saw their quarry emerge from it. Nor did she have any more doubts about his guilt; for no sooner had he caught sight of them advancing, and before Teddy had shouted for him to stop, he was off and away, streaking down the avenue between the chalets.

"Go and see if she's all right," exclaimed Teddy, jerking his finger towards Phyllis

Arnold's chalet. Reluctantly Sally obeyed him. The girl was reclining on a chaise longue, looking seedy and not a little startled.

"What are they shouting about?" she asked.

"Oh, it's just someone shouting," Sally replied vaguely: it would do no good to have the girl further alarmed.

"You sound quite breathless, Miss Er."

"I've been running." Sally, though young, realised by instinct that there are occasions when the truth is much more deceptive than any lie. "I thought I'd pop in and ask how you're getting on."

"It's very nice of you, I'm sure. Not that I'm ill, mind you. Not as you might say ill. It's all subjective, don't you think?" Miss Arnold pushed her arms deeper beneath the rug. "Still, I always say you don't know how sympathetic people are till you're down. Look at the way working-class people help each other. I don't know how many inquiries I've had this morning. There was a gentleman who left just before you came in—ever so kind he was—asked me all about how it happened, and wanted to see my scars—my arms, I mean."

"Did you show them to him?"

"I didn't want to, you understand that, don't you, dear? But he was so kind, it would have been like snubbing him. So I let him take off the bandages."

"Did you?" Sally's heart seemed to miss a beat. "Did he—do anything?"

"Do anything? He was most respectful. I wouldn't let a man take liberties."

"Did he touch them? The scars?"

"No, he just looked at them, that's all. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Are those the bandages on the table? Oughtn't you to put them on again? Let me do it. Practise my First Aid."

"No, dear, thank you all the same. I mustn't give in to such weakness again. It's all subjective, you see."

"You mean the blisters weren't really there at all?"

"Not exactly that. But if I believe I'm well again, and have enough faith, I shall be well."

"But couldn't you have the bandages on and still believe that——?"

"You don't understand, dear," said Miss Arnold with exasperating patience. At this point Teddy Wise turned up, inquired after the invalid and took Sally off with him. The unknown man had escaped him, he said, running through the trees, clambering over the farm wall, and making off on a motor-bike: Teddy had not been able to see the registration number, and the chap would have been two miles away before he could have returned to the camp garage and got out his own car for pursuit. Sally told him what the stranger had been doing in Miss Arnold's chalet.

"If this chap is the hermit and the Mad Hatter," said Teddy, "it's hard to see what he was up to. He should have been buzzing around with more treacle, or whatever his next bit of dirty work is, not comparing notes with his victims."

"But who else could he have been? Why did he run away?"

"It beats me. The old head-piece simply cannot stand the racket. I say, d'you know anything about this detective bloke your dad recommended?"

"No. I've never even seen him."

"I always think of private detectives as furtive little blighters who can just reach up to peer through the keyhole. I suppose this one's a master-man, though—hawk-like eye, eight-cylinder brain and all that. Well, he'll need it."

"I wish I knew what really goes on in your head," Sally startled herself by saying. Teddy grinned his easy, modest grin.

“Damn all, if you want to know. But don’t tell anyone else.”

Sally was conscious of having been politely but firmly warned off the grass. It irritated and puzzled her. She said:

“You take everything as a sort of game.”

“Well, games are all I’m good at.” He glanced at her self-defensively, a little wary but still good-humoured, like a boxing instructor whose pupil has landed on him with unexpected violence.

“But you can’t go on playing games all your life.”

“It’ll be time enough to worry about that when I’ve got a middle-aged spread, athlete’s heart and fallen arches, my good wench.”

Sally could not resist the impulse to break through his good-humour: there was a delicious feeling of temerity in baiting him—he was so strong and handsome—she half-wanted him to hit back.

“But surely you want to get on and do something,” she said. “Something better than playing rounders with knock-kneed girls. You must have some ambition.”

“O, I leave ambition to Mortimer. One big noise’ll be quite enough in the family. Why this sudden solicitude for my future, anyway?”

“I don’t like seeing people wasting themselves, I suppose.”

“Life is real, life is earnest, what? Sounds to me as if you’d been having some propaganda pumped into you. Our Mr. Perry, was it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Anyway, he does at least take his work seriously.”

“Oh, but don’t I? Our games organiser is the most conscientious little worker on the staff. Always bright, always on the spot to help you over your difficulties, Wonderland’s leading ray of sunshine. Which reminds me, I’m supposed to be officiating at the tennis tournament this morning. And I must toddle off first and report to my bro on the sinister bloke we’ve just chased off. Always on the go. A selfless life dedicated to the cause of others. Cheerio, Sally.”

At that she had to leave it. As she strolled over to the notice-board, to see what time she was booked to play in the tournament, Sally took stock of herself. The fright she had got this morning, together with the atmosphere of uncertainty and unreality which the Mad Hatter seemed to have cast over Wonderland, had sobered her up. For the moment, at any rate, she could not take either herself or others at their face value. It was a queer sort of holiday: it had been queer from the word go, from the first time Paul Perry had spoken to them in the train, treating her with a stand-offishness she had never met with in any other young man. I could get him if I tried, though, she said to herself: and I could get Teddy, but not so easily. I wonder what this Nigel Strangeways will be like? Why, I never even asked Daddy if he was married: I must be losing grip.

X

NIGEL STRANGEWAYS CAME to Wonderland with a mind that was not only open but quite empty. His brief conversation over the telephone with Mr. Thistlethwaite had told him no more than that funny business was going on in the camp: some sort of practical joker, on the face of it, though Mr. Thistlethwaite had hinted at darker things and wheels within wheels. Nigel had not had time even to make inquiries about Wonderland Ltd. before setting off: nor had he the least idea what a holiday camp was like.

He was certainly unprepared for the vast, Hollywood-like structure that met his eyes as the car drove up through the park. One of the Wonderland staff had been sent to meet his train, but Nigel was too much exercised about something else to ask many questions during the drive. He was worrying, to be explicit, about his suit. Clothes did not normally bulk large in his preoccupations; but, when you were going to meet Mr. Thistlethwaite, for whom clothes did very much make the man, you began to regret money that might have been spent on trouser-press, coat-hangers, cleaning and pressing.

The grey, pin-striped flannels he was wearing had certainly been made by Mr. Thistlethwaite. But they had been made several years ago, since when Nigel had got into the habit of patronising ready-made tailors. Would Mr. Thistlethwaite have forgiven this desertion? If he had not, Nigel was in for it. Though it was more than twelve years since, a callow undergraduate, he had first timidly entered Mr. Thistlethwaite's establishment, his awe of the great man was little diminished. Shuddering slightly, he recalled that occasion—the first and last when he had ventured to dispute Mr. Thistlethwaite's judgment. It was on the question of buttons. Nigel had wished for only two on the front of the lounge suit the tailor had consented to make for him. Mr. Thistlethwaite had indicated that gentlemen were no longer wearing two buttons: three was the correct number. With rash and fatal obstinacy, Nigel had stood out for two. Whereupon Mr. Thistlethwaite had drawn himself up, expanded till he seemed to fill like an outraged deity the holy of holies that was his fitting-room, and pronounced:

"If you insist, sir, I will give you two buttons. I can only say"—Mr. Thistlethwaite's voice took on a note of glacial distaste—"I can only say that it will look very silly."

Nigel had capitulated instantly. Never again did he join issue with the tailor. But the incident had left an indelible trauma on his mind. To-day, getting out of the car, peering short-sightedly into the vast atrium of Wonderland, he felt the old wound begin to throb again.

Mr. Thistlethwaite was awaiting him inside. With the air of one veteran statesman receiving another at a peace conference, he advanced upon Nigel over the rubber floor, hand outstretched.

"This is indeed a pleasure," he boomed. "Unfortunate though the circumstances be."

"I hope you're well, Mr. Thistlethwaite."

"Thank you, sir. I keep my health." Mr. Thistlethwaite stood back a little, still grasping Nigel's hand. "I fancy we had the pleasure of making that suit for you."

"Yes. Er, yes. Worn very well, hasn't it?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite smoothed down a slight ruck under the collar. “A good suit, sir, I always say, remains an aristocrat to the end.”

They stood in silence for a few moments, out of respect for this dictum. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite conducted him upstairs to the manager’s office.

“Captain Wise,” he said on the way, “will put you *au fail* with the situation. You will find him quite an agreeable gentleman, though we cannot approve of temporary officers, great as their services to their country in her hour of need have doubtless been, retaining their military titles in civil life. In a free democracy such as ours, we wish for nothing that savours of a standing army.”

Nigel forbore to question the logic of this remarkable utterance. Presently he was seated in Captain Wise’s best arm-chair, listening to an account of what had happened: Mr. Thistlethwaite had tactfully removed himself, but Miss Jones remained, supplementing her employer’s statement when necessary from her own notes. The two obviously worked so well together that it surprised Nigel when Captain Wise suddenly rounded on the secretary over a quite trivial point. Wise mentioned that he had informed the visitors last night of Nigel’s coming.

“You told them I was a private investigator?”

“Yes.”

“If you don’t mind my saying so, I don’t think you should have done that. It’s bound to hamper me a bit, especially as you want the inquiry to be done as tactfully as possible and without interfering too much with the normal camp life.”

“That was a point I made too, you will remember, Captain Wise,” said Miss Jones, crisply but quite respectfully.

It was then that Mortimer Wise turned on her. “Will you kindly remember that you’re paid to be my secretary, not assist ant manager!” he burst out in a harsh, nervy voice. “I’ll ask your advice when I want it.”

Miss Jones’ shocked expression and the way Nigel was regarding his toe-caps seemed to make him realise that he’d been unreasonable. He apologised, but only to Nigel.

“Sorry, Strangeways. The fact is, this business is getting me down. I quite appreciate your point, but you must realise the difficulty of my position. The visitors have been getting very restive about what they called my inactivity. By rights I ought probably to have called in the police, but that would be exceedingly bad for Wonderland Ltd. Of course, we’ve been working quietly away at it, taking precautions, and so on; but we needed a rather more public gesture——”

“Flinging me as a sop to still the public clamour?” suggested Nigel, smiling gently.

“Well, a bit of that,” Captain Wise admitted. “But of course I’ve every confidence that you’ll solve our little problem as well. It’s probably simple enough. I’m afraid I’m not cut out for a detective myself.”

“You say you’ve taken precautions——”

“Yes. Members of the staff patrol the chalets at night now, and others keep an eye on this building. Then, we’re particularly careful about—well, for instance, there’s a cabaret show tonight organised by the women visitors: the staff take turns to guard the concert hall and the room back-stage where the dresses and properties are kept.”

“You have implicit confidence in your staff, then? I noticed, when you suggested just now that these outrages might be an attempt on someone’s part to damage the Wonderland company or your own position in it, you made no reference to the staff. Surely, if anyone has a grievance, it’d most likely be one of them?”

“You’d think so, I agree. But actually our staff is extraordinarily happy—this isn’t

just advertisement eye-wash: they're well paid, the hours aren't hard, no one is under notice or anything like that. I don't see how there could be any grievance against the company. Against me personally—well, it's not for me to say: but you'll have full facilities for interviewing the staff, and I don't think you'll hear any complaints—first-hand or second-hand—about my treatment of them."

"Captain Wise is very popular with the personnel of the camp," Miss Jones interposed. Nigel was struck by the contrast between the intelligence of her eyes and the sensuousness of her lips. If I was Captain Wise, he thought, I should have some difficulty in treating her as a mere office machine. Maybe he doesn't.

"Supposing you're right," he said, "we're left with a choice between one of the visitors and this hermit fellow. We know the hermit has a grievance against Wonderland and there are certain indications—the aerial photograph, the unknown man who turned up this morning—that he may have been in the camp. If it's one of the visitors, the odds are that these outrages are bone-fide practical jokes or else the work of someone with a screw loose. You've already made inquiries at your central office and discovered that none of the visitors has ever been in the company's employment: unless, of course, someone is here under a false name. In any case, Wonderland Ltd. has only been in existence for three years, and within such a short time any grudge again the company could easily be traced."

Captain Wise nodded. "Yes, that sums it up very well." He glanced at his wrist-watch—a thin, gold, rather feminine affair, Nigel noticed—and suggested they should have an aperitif. Miss Jones removed her horn-rimmed spectacles, walked over to a shiny cabinet by the wall which Nigel had vaguely assumed to be a radiogram, and opened it to reveal a cocktail bar. The removal of the spectacles had changed her at once from the confidential secretary to the charming hostess: gracefully handling the cocktails, she might have been a woman who had never had to do a day's work for her living.

"They do you very well here," Nigel remarked. "Free drinks, private bar installed—or is that an addition of your own?"

"No. Supplied by the company. We get a few perks."

Miss Jones opened a filing-cabinet and took out some papers. "Here is some material you may find useful, Mr. Strangeways. A statement of the action we took after the first practical joke: a list of the people who were on the beach then, in the order in which they left it: and notes about people who were absent from meals at times when the outrages might have been prepared—I'm afraid these are very incomplete and won't be much help—we couldn't pursue that sort of inquiry very far without giving offence."

A waft of some rare, sophisticated perfume came to Nigel as she leant over his shoulders with the papers. He tucked them away in a pocket and took another sip of his excellent cocktail.

"I imagine you've got no definite suspicions of anyone yet," he said.

"No. I must say I can't believe it's one of the visitors. The recluse I mentioned seems the likeliest bet at present. Have you got those copies of the press cuttings there, Miss Jones?"

The secretary took some carbon copies from the drawer and passed them over.

"This is a dossier of the controversy that took place over the building of the holiday camp. You'll find the hermit's evidence here—Philip Grebble seems to be his legal name, but everyone's got into the habit of calling him Old Ishmael—and a few paragraphs about his private life; and here's a photograph Miss Jones managed to dig up, taken at the time of the controversy."

"Dear me," murmured Nigel, regarding the photograph. "'His beard was grizzled —no?'"

"'It was, as I have seen it in his life, a sable silver'd,'" Miss Jones neatly capped the quotation.

"And the treacly tennis-balls. 'The old ornament of his cheek hath stuffed tennis-balls.'"

"I'm afraid I can't compete with that one," Miss Jones smiled.

"Out of *Much Ado*."

Captain Wise glanced impatiently at them. "Well, perhaps you'll tell me what lines you intend to work on, Strangeways. Any help I can give you——"

"Yes. To be sure." Nigel was still staring dreamily at the photograph. "'Now may Jove in his next commodity of hair send thee a beard.' I'd better look into Ishmael first. Can you lend me an ordnance map of the district? And I'd like to go over the course of the treasure-hunt."

"I'll get my brother to take you. He's our games organiser, and arranged the clues."

"You mean, he made them up?"

"No. He hid them at the various points. Miss Jones composed them. She has a literary turn of mind."

"She seems a paragon of the virtues," said Nigel gallantly. "By the way, why did you put one clue so close to where this recluse lives? Wasn't it rather asking for trouble?"

Captain Wise looked considerably disconcerted. It was his first experience of the direct way in which Nigel often leapt upon a weak spot. Miss Jones came to his rescue.

"I'm afraid it was my doing. Old Ishmael has been a bit of a nuisance to us. You'll read more about it in the report I've given you. I thought that, if we sent a number of the visitors routing round on the outskirts of his wood, he might pack up and go off somewhere else. He doesn't like his privacy to be disturbed. It was a sort of counter-attack—a stupid idea, really, I suppose."

"Why do you want to go over the treasure-hunt?" asked Captain Wise.

"To find out how this girl got the blisters, if I can. It seems more likely to have happened there than in the camp, seeing that nobody else was affected."

"But surely you don't entertain the notion that it had anything to do with mustard-gas? It's quite fantastic. She's not a healthy-looking girl, and Doctor Holford found out that she often gets skin-trouble."

"Mm. Still, blisters are not skin-trouble in the normal sense. There must have been some pretty powerful external irritant to create ones like these." Nigel set down his cocktail glass precariously on the arm of his chair. "Who put about this mustardgas theory, anyway?"

"Well, you know the way rumours do crop up," Captain Wise replied slowly. He looked embarrassed: his instinct, thought Nigel, is to protect the customer. Miss Jones began:

"Mr. Strangeways has only to ask Doctor Holford——"

"I don't think I shall require you any more for the present, Miss Jones," the manager said frigidly. "You have the programme for to-night to duplicate."

Miss Jones reddened, threw up her firm chin and went out. Captain Wise looked at Nigel apologetically.

"I have to keep that girl down a bit. She's invaluable, of course, but sometimes she trades on it. You were asking?—Oh, yes, about the rumour. Well, actually a

young chap staying here, called Perry—he's a Mass Observer and doing a survey of the camp—he was the first to suggest mustard-gas. Tactless of him, but nothing more, I'm sure. The doctor noticed the resemblance at once, too. Unfortunately the girl has a friend who happened to be there when Perry came out with the remark, and I'm afraid she broadcast it."

"I see. Yes. Tell me more about your Mr. Perry."

Captain Wise gave an account of the questionnaire, and mentioned that Paul had struck up acquaintance with Mr. Thistlethwaite. "But I don't see that young man behind this business," he ended.

"The psychology of the practical joker is apt to be pretty odd, you know."

"Yes," said Captain Wise dryly. "So Miss Gardiner keeps telling us. She's a schoolmistress staying here."

"I think we may find that Miss Arnold's blisters are nothing to do with the case—not one of the practical joke series, I mean. But, if the Mad Hatter is quick-witted, he'd jump at an incident like this and do his best to give the impression that it *was* one of the series. If he was quick-witted *and* in deadly earnest, that is to say. And what could be better calculated to create panic than a rumour of poison-gas?"

"That's all very well. But there's not a suggestion of motive——"

At this point the gong boomed out for luncheon. "I've arranged for you to have meals with the guests. I imagine you'd prefer that?"

"Thanks. Yes. You don't eat with them yourself?"

"Not as a general rule. One has to be frightfully careful to avoid favouritism, and if I had a sort of captain's table——"

In a few minutes, Mr. Thistlethwaite was introducing Nigel to the other people sitting at his table—his wife and Sally, Paul Perry, Albert Morley. Nigel liked the look of Mr. Thistlethwaite's daughter: she struck him as being a little overwrought at the moment, but that was to be expected as a result of what had happened to her in the last two days. He wondered just what was behind her attitude towards young Perry: she would tease him unmercifully for a little, and then break off, and eye him in a covert, undecided sort of way when he was not looking. Nigel, too, was unobtrusively taking stock of the young man who had started the mustard-gas rumour. Dark, touchy, eyes a trifle protuberant, a trace of some Midland or Northern accent in his voice, features from time to time set in a scowl (concentration? self-consciousness? pugnacity? recurrent headache?), serious, not much humour, perhaps a bit of a prig, tougher perhaps than he looks, could be vindictive—Nigel enumerated his impressions as they came to him.

The subject of his observation leaned across the table and said to him abruptly:

"I thought amateur detectives only existed in books."

It was an ungraceful opening to a conversation; but Nigel guessed that it had been less deliberately offensive than characteristic of a person who tried to give himself confidence by assuming a blunt, dominating manner towards strangers. He replied equably:

"Oh no, they exist in real life too. I'm not an amateur, though: I get paid."

"By the hour, or by results?"

"That depends on the client. Normally, I ask a retaining fee plus expenses."

"And what sort of people do you get as clients? Ones who are afraid to call in the police?"

"Sometimes. Or it may be a person under suspicion by the police, or an arrested man whom his friends believe innocent."

"What happens if you're being hired to prove someone's innocence and you

discover they're guilty after all?"

"I don't hire myself out to prove anyone's innocence. I do it to discover the truth. If the truth turns against them, that's their look-out."

"It must be a wonderful feeling," Mr. Morley chipped in, "battling for a mans' innocence, probing into the dark corners of human nature——"

"Especially when you get a nice, fat fee for it," said Paul Perry with a quick, nervous sneer.

Nigel was not one to let that kind of thing pass. Gazing steadily at Paul, he said:

"Is it me you disapprove of, or private investigators as a class?"

"I'm not disapproving anything. I'm just interested in facts."

"So, oddly enough, am I. And one of the first facts I have come across in this case is that you are being openly offensive. Several inferences might be drawn from this. We might infer, for example," Nigel continued in his most dispassionate voice, "that you are a person of naturally boorish disposition: or that you're rattled about something and trying to take it out on the first available subject: or that you have some reason to be frightened of me, and—in an attempt to put a bold face on your fears—are betraying those fears. Or perhaps you've just eaten something that disagreed with you."

"Golly!" murmured Sally Thistlethwaite, gazing wide-eyed at Nigel. "Send for the ambulance, somebody."

"Nevertheless," Nigel added, "in the course of your remarks, you made one which may prove quite illuminating."

XI

AFTER LUNCH NIGEL had a brief conversation with Dr. Holford, and then went off with Teddy Wise to retrace the treasure-hunt. Miss Arnold's partner on that occasion had been Mr. Easton, the live-wire young man on the Sports Committee who had suggested that the management should organise a competition for discovering the Mad Hatter. At Nigel's suggestion, they took Mr. Easton with them so that they should cover exactly the same ground.

"Just what will you be looking for, Mr. Strangeways?" the young man said as they made their way towards the place where the first clue had been hidden.

"To tell you the truth, I don't quite know. But Doctor Holford has satisfied himself that Miss Arnold could not have come by her injury inside the camp grounds; and the blisters came up after the treasure-hunt; so the chances are she got them somehow in the course of it. She didn't complain of being stung, or anything like that?"

"No. She couldn't, I suppose, being a Christian Scientist. Not rightly." Mr. Easton proceeded to recite the somewhat hackneyed limerick on this subject—a donnish limerick which consorted oddly with his on-the-spot, executive appearance, the lantern jaw, the tuft of hair that stood up like a parrot's crest above his forehead, and the cockney accent.

Presently he brought them to the first clue. It had been tucked inside the coiled halliards of a flag-pole that stood on a slight eminence three or four hundred yards west from the main building.

"Easy, this one was," commented Mr. Easton:

> "'Wonderland waves
> Up in the sky:
> Where the rope coils,
> There lurk I.'

Not quite up to Shakespeare, Mr. Strangeways, is it?"

"Far from it," said Nigel, gazing at the green flag with *Wonderland* in white letters that hung limply above them. "Still, it served its purpose. Captain Wise must have fun working out these rhymes."

"Not my bro—he's no bard. It's Esmeralda who makes them up. His secretary."

"Of course. I remember, he told me that," said Nigel, who had never in fact forgotten it. He examined the coils of the halliard and the flag-pole. "No poison unknown to science here, as far as I can see. Lead on, Mr. Easton."

The next stage took them out of the camp grounds, farther westwards and along the cliffs. The cries of bathers came up to them, lazy and idyllic in the summer air, through the tangled wilderness of the landslide.

"Bad weather for the Mad Hatter," said Mr. Easton.

"Why?"

"Well, if it was raining, people'd be staying indoors and getting on each other's nerves, see?"

"That's true," said Nigel, who liked the young man's sprightly, sensible air. "Yet Pan was an out-of-door god, and he was the one who started panics."

"D'you reckon that's what he's out for—to start a panic? Why doesn't he do

something a bit more sweeping, then? Set fire to the camp, for instance? Burn like fun, those chalets would."

"Hey," cried Teddy Wise humorously, "don't you start putting ideas in his head!"

"He'll have plenty to choose from by now, Mr. Wise. Half the people in the camp are talking about what he'll do next."

"Apprehensively? Or are they just interested?" Nigel asked.

"Well, you know what the public is like. They're going to have their three quids' worth all right, and for two pins they'd run a sweepstake on the Mad Hatter's next move. When you're on holiday, you quite enjoy a bit of excitement—gives you something to talk about back at work. But, mind you, I reckon plenty of 'em here'll not go to a Wonderland camp another year, especially the older ones and those who've brought their kids. They're not windy, exactly, but you can try anyone too far, see?"

The second hiding-place took a bit of finding. Teddy Wise, of course, knew where it had been; but Nigel wished Mr. Easton to re-discover it for himself in the same manner as during the actual treasure-hunt. It involved taking cross-bearings between the distant mole of Applestock port, the just-visible top of the white Wonderland building, a church tower to the north and a gorse-bush not far from the cliff's edge. Nigel's eyesight was not good enough to pick out the first of these objects, but Mr. Easton, who kept up a running commentary on his own movements, explained that it was the eastward wall of the naval harbour.

No results were yielded here, so the three of them turned off inland towards the third hiding-place. It had not been difficult to pick up—the clue leading down a high, narrow lane, through a gate on which "Beware of the Bull" had been scrawled in red paint and as untidily crossed out, into a rectangular-shaped pasture. To-day, however, Mr. Easton seemed at fault once they had entered the field.

"It looks different," he muttered as they skirted the hedge that separated field from lane. "Not that I'd know parsley when I saw it, except on fish-balls. Miss Arnold's good at plants and such, luckily."

"Parsley?"

"That's what she said it was. I dunno. It's gone now. Hasn't someone been cutting the stuff on this bank?"

"Yes, they have," said Nigel. "Could you find the place you hid this clue, Wise?"

"Well, it ought to be just about here. In a clump of weeds—big, coarse-looking chaps—with white flowers. Parsley my eye, Easton. They're not here now, anyway."

"One of the varieties of wild parsley, I expect," said Nigel. "If there's been a hedger at work here since yesterday, he's almost certain to be about still. Can anyone see him?"

Teddy Wise teetered aimlessly on his toes. "Don't want to butt in on the man at the wheel, but is this going to get us anywhere? I mean, an innocent wild flower, it wouldn't give you blisters, would it?"

"I don't think what's normally known as wild parsley—hedge-parsley, that is—is poisonous. But there's cow-bane and fool's-parsley, which certainly are—they're the umbelliferous tribe too: and there's cow-parsnip, which farmers often mistake for hemlock, but it's supposed to be harmless. You can't describe this stuff more accurately, can you?"

Teddy, however, was no more of a botanist than young Easton. Nigel was standing indecisively by the bank when a sharp click sounded not far away, followed by a round, vernacular oath.

"That'll be him. Caught his bill-hook on a stone," Nigel exclaimed. They went

towards the end of the field, through a gap, and out into the lane which curved round just here. An old man, creaking with rheumatism, was in the act of bending down to pick up a whet-stone. When Nigel hailed him, he straightened himself up with the same cautious deliberation, as if any abrupt movement would cause his whole frame to fly asunder, and scrutinised the three of them in a somewhat hostile manner.

"They danged stones," he remarked without preamble. "Which of you young shavers have been setting stones in my bank. You'm ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

Nigel disclaimed any act of sabotage on their part, but the ancient was plainly incredulous.

"They sow tares in the wheat," he continued sombrely. "They come as an enemy in the night. I will root them out utterly, and they shall be for a hissing. Turned my blade, you'm have. Their brains shall be dashed out on the stones thereof."

"Was it you who cut the bank in the next field this morning?" asked Nigel.

"What if I did?" the old man replied suspiciously. "Be you from thic domned Milk Board? Us can tend ceows without no rules and regulations from ee."

"No fear, dad. We're from the holiday camp," said Teddy.

"Holiday camp? Graacht!" The old man spat copiously on his whet-stone and set to sharpening the hook. "Heathens. Runnen over th' filds stark naked. Might be the middle of Africa," he muttered.

"It's no good. You'll not get anything out of him," said Teddy.

Nigel, however, persevered. "Well, we're quite decently dressed, anyway, aren't we? When you were cutting that bank——"

"The Lord smote en with sore boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his haid," quoted the ancient, inaccurately but sensationally.

"*What's that?*" exclaimed Nigel.

"Hast thou not poured me out as milk, and curdled me like cheese?" He giggled hoarsely. "That'll larn 'em not to flaunt their nakedness in the Lord's eyes."

After a prolonged conversation, that would have tried the patience even of stricken Job himself, Nigel caught the old man's drift. By his account it seemed that the "wild parsley," as he called it, was exceedingly poisonous just at this time of the year, when it first began to flower. He admitted that he himself had never been affected by it: but, when he was cleaning the banks at the flowering time, he always wore leather gloves and carefully protected his legs. He recalled the case of a maiden, some fifty years ago, who had picked some flowering parsley and died a week after in agonies which he rendered with full detail.

Nigel asked him to point out some of this "wild parsley." He did so: and Nigel, bandaging his hand in a handkerchief, pulled it up, gave it to Mr. Easton, and told him to take it straight back to Dr. Holford. He then drew Teddy Wise aside, and asked him if he would go to Brimscombe Farm, where the old man worked, and inquire about the reliability of his information.

Having thus got rid of his two associates, Nigel was free to put certain questions which he did not wish either of them to hear. The old man, when he was not wandering off down scriptural by-paths, showed flashes of considerable shrewdness. No, nobody from the holiday camp had talked to him about this wild parsley before: but it was a common belief in the countryside round about that the stuff was dangerous for one week of the year. Nigel turned the conversation to the subject of Old Ishmael. "He'm daft as a coney, but don't harm nobody," was the verdict. Nigel asked if anyone from the holiday camp had been showing particular interest in the

recluse lately, or whether the latter had made any departures from his normal mode of living. The old man answered no to each of these questions: he recalled, however, that just over a year ago a gentleman who was staying at Brimscombe Farm, a holiday visitor, had asked all manner of questions about the hermit.

When he judged that Teddy Wise would have left the farm, Nigel made his way thither and interviewed the farmer. A friend of his, he believed, had stayed at Brimscombe last year: he himself being in the district for a few days, thought he might walk over to the farm; he had a family, and was looking for holiday quarters where he could bring them next year. Farmer Swetenham, a cheerful, robin-eyed, chubby man, pressed him to a mug of cider. He and the missus liked children about the place, as long as they remembered to shut the gates and didn't chivvy the stock. Not that their last visitor, Mr. Strangeways' friend, had brought his family. A quiet, civil chap he was: great on the bird-watching: took his field-glasses out on the cliffs most days. Yes, he had been very interested in Old Ishmael too. Wanted to go bird-watching in that wood up over, but Mr. Swetenham had told him the hermit didn't like people going about in his wood. He had suggested that the visitor, Mr. Black, should drop in at the Mariner's Compass in Applestock some Wednesday or Saturday. Old Ishmael was always there then, they said, and a bit mellower than usual, so he might give Mr. Black permission to go into his wood.

Nigel then brought the conversation round to Wonderland. Mentioning the treasure-hunt, he suggested that it was very good of Mr. Swetenham to let them go over his land. The farmer winked slyly:

"They buy a lot of their milk from me. I don't want to lose their custom, if you take my meaning. Still, I was a bit surprised when young Mr. Wise—he's just been in here—wrote and asked if he could put one of his clues in a field of mine. They don't generally go so far away from the camp grounds on these treasure-hunts, not to my knowledge."

"I suppose you told him whereabouts on your land he could plant the clues, so that the visitors wouldn't do any damage?"

"No. He suggested the Long Bottom field. I hadn't any cattle there this week, so I made no objection."

"I don't expect they'll be troubling you again. One of the visitors, a young lady, got badly blistered after the treasure-hunt. We've——"

The farmer laughed merrily. "Don't you believe it, sir. Young Mr. Wise has just been talking to me about it. Been listening to Joe Varley. That's a labourer of mine. He's got a bee in his bonnet about wild parsley. Well, it's the talk round here that the stuff's poisonous when it first flowers, but I've never known anyone it hurt—nor beast neither."

Nigel took his leave of the farmer and walked back to Wonderland. There, after tea, he sought conversation with Dr. Holford. The doctor had examined the plant brought back by Mr. Easton, broken some of the coarse stalks and squeezed the juice over his own forearm. He was now awaiting developments.

"But I don't think anything will come of it," he said. "I examined some of the other people who were on the treasure-hunt and presumably routed about for the clue in the wild parsley, and they showed no signs of blistering. However, I'll send some of the stuff up to be analysed."

"Unfortunately the hedger had cut all the stuff in the field where the clue was hidden. He'd got a pile of hedge-cuttings about five foot high, and I couldn't very well bring it all back to see if any of it had been doped with something."

"There would have been no point in it, anyway. If some irritant poison had been

sprayed on those plants, more than one person would have been affected. Miss Arnold's is plainly a case of idiosyncrasy to this particular plant."

"Yes, that's what I imagined. The hedger had a yarn about some girl years ago who died from the effects."

"Died? One would hardly—I shall have to keep an eye on Miss Arnold for a bit. Stupid girl—I found she'd left the bandages off when I went to see her before lunch. Wish I'd got some more of my books here. Of course, there are cases of idiosyncrasy to almost every kind of substance, but I'd like to see if any similar to this one have actually been recorded. It'd make an interesting article for the *Lancet*. But I'm sorry, talking shop like this. How does it affect your investigation?"

"Depends if Miss Arnold's idiosyncrasy had ever come out before, and if anyone here could have known of it."

"I think I can answer that. I inquired if she'd ever had blisters of this sort, and she said no. Of course, having this Christian Science bug, she'd be bound to pretend that they'd never happened——"

"—Which rather invalidates her evidence. Easton said she was a botanist, and you'd expect that anyone who went in for botany at all would have handled these plants some time or other."

"But, my dear fellow," said the doctor, "you realise what you're leading up to? If it was known that Miss Arnold had this idiosyncrasy, the only people who could have made use of the knowledge were——"

"Exactly. Miss Jones worked out the rhyming clues: Captain Wise and his brother no doubt helped with suggestions as to where the clues should actually be planted. Teddy Wise, I discovered just now, applied to the farmer on whose land Miss Arnold received her injury for permission to place a clue: he specifically mentioned Long Bottom, a field where this stuff grows."

Dr. Holford was plainly torn between curiosity and his own semi-official obligations to the management. Curiosity soon won. "But whatever motive could any of those three have for making Miss Arnold ill?" he said in faintly shocked tones.

"Oh, I've not got as far as motives yet. They're the spring of crime, certainly, from the criminal's point of view: but as far as the detective is concerned, they're only a final polish on the finished article. But, theoretically, I could hand you several possible motives. The most obvious would be that one of the Wises, or Miss Jones, or a combination of them, is the Mad Hatter."

Dr. Holford gripped the arms of his chair and leant back, staring at Nigel.

"But that's fantastic. They'd be cutting their own throats, giving the camp a bad name. You can't seriously——"

He looked comically concerned. He's reflecting, guessed Nigel, what effect it might have on his career to be officially connected, even though remotely and by accident, with such a scandal.

"It's quite hypothetical," he said. "I have no reason at present to suppose that any of them could want to do the place down." He could not resist adding mischievously. "But, of course, Edward Wise may be jealous of his brother's position. You never know."

"Are you always as frank as this about your suspects—and *to* your suspects? I suppose we all come into that category," said the doctor slowly, after a pause. "I'd always imagined detectives kept their own counsel, or contented themselves with throwing out a few cryptic utterances."

"Like doctors?" said Nigel, grinning amiably. "I can be excessively cryptic at times. But frankness often pays. It's infectious, for one thing: if you talk quite

unreservedly to a person, he assumes that you cannot possibly be suspecting him; and so he grows just a little careless."

"This looks bad for me," said Dr. Holford, not altogether comfortably. "Am I being grilled?"

"Well, you must agree that a doctor is much more likely to have strychnine at his disposal than any layman."

"Really! If you're suggesting that I poisoned that woman's dog——" The young man was now quite distinctly huffy. His remonstrations were cut short, however, by sounds of strife outside the chalet. Nigel opened the door, took a half-step forward, then checked himself, motioning Dr. Holford not to interfere.

Sally Thistlethwaite and Paul Perry were there, glaring at each other, standing in the tense, arrested attitudes of people in whom a quarrel is on the point of boiling over.

"You *were* laughing at me," she said.

"I was doing nothing of the sort, as it happens. Though that ridiculous costume you were all prancing about in would be enough to make a cat laugh."

Paul twitched open her tennis-coat, revealing the brassière and short imitation-grass skirt in which Sally had just been rehearsing the South Sea maiden dance for the carabet.

"Don't touch me, damn you! You *were* laughing. You and that Jones creature, with your heads together, giggling like two silly schoolgirls. I saw you. Who said you could come in, anyway? Snooping as usual, I suppose?"

"Miss Jones said I could come and watch. It's part of my job, watching how people behave."

"Job, hell! You just wanted a free leg-show. Well, I hope you enjoyed it."

"If it's any comfort to you, you didn't look any more ridiculous than the rest of the troupe."

"So you *were* laughing at me. Both of you."

"I merely remarked to Miss Jones that the performance would be quite beyond the farthest Hebrides."

"That was damned witty, I suppose, if anyone could understand it."

"Evidently you can't. It involves a quotation from Wordsworth, and the New Hebrides Islands in the South Seas. Miss Jones and I happened to be talking about the initiation ceremonies among the islanders there, before we came in. Now are you satisfied?"

"I suppose you spend quite a lot of your time with the Jones laughing at me? The two little high-brows having a good snigger together."

"I keep on telling you. We were *not* laughing at you in particular. It was just the spectacle of all those girls from Balham trying to go native. The trouble with you is that you imagine everyone is looking at you all the time. You're so self-conscious, it never occurs to you that we might have something more interesting to talk about than you. Not that anyone mightn't feel self-conscious in that vulgar, sexy, man-trap of a costume."

Aha, so that's it, thought Nigel: and at the same instant Sally's hand struck Paul's cheek with a noise like a pistol-crack. He stared at her for a moment, bemused, almost appealingly. Then his face darkened, and he began shaking her furiously by the shoulders. The two had only just begun to struggle, when Teddy Wise came running up and sent Paul staggering aside.

"Has he been molesting you?" asked Teddy. "My brother told me to keep an eye on you, and it's apparently needed."

“He said my cabaret dress was indecent. So I smacked his face, and then he went for me.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” said Teddy to Paul. “And what business was it of yours, may I ask?”

“Don’t be so pompous. Sally started on me long before that. She’d got some absurd idea that——”

“I think you’d better apologise to Miss Thistlethwaite,” Teddy interrupted menacingly, “or I shall have to teach you manners.”

Sally’s eyes, under her dishevelled hair, looked dark, frightened, yet fascinated and queerly eager. There was a slight quaver in Paul Perry’s voice when he replied:

“You’re not paid to knock the guests about, you know.”

“Very true. But I’ll do it without salary if you don’t apologise instantly, little man.”

Paul glanced desperately at Sally, who gave him back a cool, challenging gaze. Then he exclaimed, sulky, trembling, beaten:

“Oh, all right, all right. I apologise. You can call off your tame thug, Sally.”

“But that won’t do at all,” said Teddy. “You must say it nicely, or else——”

“Pipe down, will you, Teddy!” Sally’s voice suddenly broke, and crying out, “Oh, I hate you both,” she began to weep.

“Oh well, now,” said Teddy uncomfortably. Looking round as if for help out of this embarrassing situation, his eye caught Nigel standing in the door of the doctor’s chalet. He seemed as if about to speak, but then strode off with hunched shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Sally.” Paul’s voice was infinitely dejected now. The girl walked away without looking at him. Nigel felt a certain sympathy for the young man standing there so miserably: he could not, of course, express it—Paul Perry was in a mood when sympathy would sound like an insult. Instead, Nigel approached him and in a business-like voice, as though he had not witnessed the scene, asked if Perry could spare half an hour to go over the work on the questionnaire papers which he had done with Mr. Thistlethwaite.

Nigel’s friendly yet impersonal manner soon thawed the reserve that his snubbing of Perry at lunch had created. They examined the questionnaire papers together, Paul pointing out to him from a special list the names of all the visitors whose home addresses were in the same localities. After this, Nigel took him over the events of the last few days, since his arrival in the camp, paying particular attention to his account of his brush with the hermit during the treasure-hunt, and his dealings with the management. Paul had a very fair memory for detail, so that Nigel was able to build up for himself a pretty comprehensive picture of all the happenings in which the young man had played a part. Whether it was a truthful picture depended, of course, on Paul’s own veracity: he was a trained observer; but he might also be the practical joker, in which case inconsistencies would appear in his account when Nigel reconsidered it.

“I don’t know if this would be any help,” Paul said after they had brought the case up to date. “It’s the note-book in which I jot down all the bits of gossip I hear. I’m afraid it’s almost useless to me for any survey of normal holiday-camp life, because this Mad Hatter has rather dominated the conversation. But you might get some ideas out of it.”

“Thanks very much. It sounds just the thing.”

“Oh, and by the way,” said Paul abruptly, “I’m sorry I attacked you at lunch like I did. I can’t imagine why—well, I suppose one’s nerves are getting a bit jangled—it’s the utter pointlessness of these practical jokes. One feels it must be a lunatic at

work."

"A schizophrenic, perhaps? That's quite possible."

"Let's hope they stop, now that you've arrived. The chap may think better of it."

"Yes. Unless he's a schizophrenic. When your left hand doesn't know what your right's been doing——"

"I say, it's nearly dinner-time. I suppose I ought to put on a suit in honour of this leg-show we're being treated to tonight…."

The ladies' cabaret was generally voted to be one of the greatest successes of the week. Many of the performers belonged to amateur dramatic or operatic societies at home: there was one genuine comic actress; a torch-singer, if you liked that kind of thing; a sketch or two performed by visitors who had been at the camp for long enough to allow rehearsals; while the chorus of South Sea maidens made up in agility and tunefulness for what they lacked in looks or professional polish. Not that any great merit was required to ensure the little show's success. For the audience had evidently come prepared for intervention on the part of the Mad Hatter, keyed up to a more than normal state of excitement; and, when it seemed more and more likely that nothing untoward would happen, they let themselves go in relief and a kind of vicarious triumph.

After the show, Captain Wise invited Nigel up to his own quarters. Nigel gave a discreet account of his discoveries during the afternoon, deliberately conveying the impression that he still kept an open mind—as indeed he did—on the question whether Phyllis Arnold's injury had been a matter of accident or not. It was thin ice here, for the manager would surely realise that, if the injury was not accidental, it must point to those who had made up the clues. Captain Wise, however, seemed to skate over it easily enough. He pressed Nigel to drinks, and even accompanied him back to his chalet.

As the manager said good night, Nigel sat down on his bed to take off his shoes. The next instant he had leapt up again with an exclamation that swung Captain Wise sharp round again.

"There's something in my bed!"

He flung back the sheets, to disclose the dead body of a rabbit. A very dead rabbit.

"God's truth!" exclaimed Captain Wise. "What the devil—it's the Mad Hatter again!"

"Yep." Nigel was much more interested in the manager than in the rabbit.

"Well, I'm damned! The fellow's got a cheek. In *your* bed, of all places." A faint smile showed at the corners of his mouth. "That's a direct challenge, Mr. Strangeways, if ever I saw one. In a way I can't help feeling glad he chose your bed and not one of the ordinary visitors'. They've had quite enough——"

But Captain Wise spoke too soon. He was interrupted by a suppressed scream from the next chalet. They ran outside, to meet a girl emerging with a dead rat held gingerly by its tail. The rat had been dead for some time, too. The commotion brought several more visitors to the spot, and a general searching of beds took place.

It was, all in all, probably the most bizarre scene Nigel had ever witnessed. The fairy-lights were still shining above the length of the chalet avenue, red, green, blue, white, yellow—giving just enough light to show the grotesque collection of corpses that were brought out one by one from the beds of the adjacent huts. Their stink began to permeate the air, as they lay in a row, the fairy-lights giving an iridescence to their shabby decay—two blackbirds, a stoat, a jay, three magpies, and a few shapeless bundles of fur or feather that had corrupted and shrivelled beyond

recognition. Round these squalid remains pressed the little group of visitors, augmented each minute by fresh arrivals drawn hither on the strength of the rumour that was already flitting through the camp. They stood for the most part in silence, their nostrils wrinkled with disgust, and when they spoke it was in whispers and asides. One or two of the women still wore their cabaret costumes.

Nigel looked down at the dead creatures. Before long he realised what it was they reminded him of—the corpses you can see strung up in a line on a gamekeeper's "gallows," a warning to other marauders of nature, in some wood. In a wood …

XII

WAKING AT EIGHT o'clock the next morning, Nigel's mind took up unbroken the thread of the night's activities. The Mad Hatter, he reflected, had certainly timed his last blow well. He must have smuggled the dead creatures into the various beds either at dinner-time or during the cabaret show, for otherwise their smell would have been detected by his victims while they were getting ready for dinner. At the same time, the fact that most of the visitors did not usually go to bed before midnight could be calculated to delay the ensuing investigation, since Captain Wise and Nigel Strangeways could not reasonably go inquiring all over the camp at so late an hour.

So, indeed, it had happened. The manager, after seeing that the victims of the outrage were supplied with fresh bed-clothes, had firmly vetoed Nigel's suggestion that they should begin making inquiries among the visitors straight away. "They wouldn't stand for it," he said. And Nigel had to admit the common sense of it. In any case, Captain Wise was paying for his services, so he had some right to call their tune.

It was after the group of onlookers had dispersed and an attendant had removed the animal corpses that Nigel hit upon the first clue. Captain Wise happened to comment upon the similarity of these corpses to the selection of dead things you find hanging on a gamekeeper's gallows.

"So you noticed it, too?" said Nigel. "It might be worth asking Perry if he came across such a gallows when he was in the hermit's wood."

"Well, you could try," the manager said doubtfully. "But that wood isn't preserved as far as I know, so you wouldn't expect to find a gamekeeper about there."

The two went along to Paul's chalet, and Captain Wise tapped on the window. He was still up, copying some material from one note-book into another. Nigel told him what had happened but he replied that he had not seen a gallows in Old Ishmael's wood. As they were conversing through the open window, Nigel's foot touched some object underneath the chalet, which was raised on brick piers a foot above the ground. He bent down idly and picked it up—a piece of thin wire a little rusted, about six feet long, with some tiny, dark bits of substance adhering to it.

"Nasty litter," said the manager, taking it from him and throwing it into a litter-basket that stood nearby. "Some of these people are incorrigible." He scratched the bridge of his nose with an irritable gesture. The next instant he was sniffing his fingers.

"I never touched any of those dead brutes, did I?" he said. "I seem to have got the smell on my fingers somehow, thought——"

Struck by the same thought, he and Nigel both moved for the litter-basket. Nigel took out the wire, smelt it, held it up against the light from the windows to examine the adhering particles.

"Well," he said at last, "here's the gallows anyway."

Paul Perry was still looking out at them, his elbows on the window-sill.

"What on earth did the chap put it here for?" he now asked, a touch of nervous defiance in his voice.

"Possibly one of the Wonderland staff saw him when he'd just finished planting the corpses, and chased him this way, and the chap thought he'd better get rid of the

wire."

"I'll go and find out who was on duty near those chalets during dinner and the cabaret," said Captain Wise.

While he was away, there was a certain constraint between Nigel and Paul Perry. Finally the young man blurted out:

"Damn it, if I'd done the thing, I shouldn't have hidden that wire under my own chalet, should I? At least, I'd have put it somewhere else as soon as the coast was clear."

"I'd imagine so myself," replied Nigel non-committally.

Presently Captain Wise was back. Jameson, one of the staff, who had been keeping an eye on the chalets earlier in the evening, had noticed a figure going round to the back of Nigel's hut during the period when the cabaret show was on. He had assumed it to be Nigel—he was too far away to see clearly—and had, therefore, taken no steps beyond calling out "good evening." The figure had then disappeared.

"In what direction, did he see?" asked Nigel.

"Well, in this direction actually," the manager said, a little hesitantly.

"Go on! Why not say it? It must have been me." Paul Perry's voice, aiming at jauntiness, failed dismally.

Nigel, who had borrowed Captain Wise's electric torch, was shining it under the chalet.

"Why leave the wire there, and not the sack?" he muttered, dusting his knees.

"Sack?"

"Well, he must have had something to carry those corpses about in. He wouldn't march round the camp dangling them on this bit of wire."

Paul Perry reached out of the window and took the wire from Nigel's hand. Captain Wise made an instinctive step forward, as though to rescue this important exhibit, then halted. They were both gazing at Paul's face on which, unless the dim light deceived them, a very curious expression had come.

"Well, Strangeways, I'll be off. This is your pigeon, eh?" said Captain Wise at last, trying to conceal his irresolution under a light, dismissing tone. "Good night. Good night, Perry."

When he was out of earshot, Paul spoke. There was no longer any defiance or jauntiness in his voice, which now held nothing but the plaintive appeal of a child who wishes his mother to rescue him from a pain he cannot understand.

"Perhaps I did do it," he said, fingering the wire, staring at it as if painfully striving to remember whether he had seen it before. "A schizophrenic, you said. I thought of that, at the beginning. Well, how am I to know if I'm not the split personality? Suppose I've been doing all these vile, stupid things—my other self? … I had a nervous breakdown at Cambridge once. Overwork. I've been afraid ever since …"

Lying in bed this morning, Nigel considered the discovery of the wire and of Paul's weak spot. They must mean one of three things, he concluded. Either Perry was in fact schizophrenic, and the Mad Hatter his second personality: or Perry was sane, had been carrying out these practical jokes for some reason as yet to be discovered, and had thrown out the schizophrenic theory in a sort of self-defence when he found the chase so uncomfortably near his own doorstep: or the wire had been planted under his chalet so as to throw suspicion upon him.

But in that case why plant the wire only? Why not the sack, too? No, the wire alone would be a more subtle touch: if Perry was to be made appear the criminal, X might argue that Perry would never have left anything under his chalet so large and

incriminating as the sack. Or perhaps it was because there was something about the sack, or whatever the receptacle had been, which would incriminate X. Yes, and this answered the question—why did Perry not get rid of the wire in the same way and at the same time as he had presumably got rid of the sack? Oh no, it didn't, though. Suppose Perry had disposed the animal corpses, heard the attendant hailing him from the distance, lost his head, run towards his own chalet, dived underneath it to hide—in the belief that the attendant was still following him? He would not dare hide for long, because presumably he'd have arranged some sort of alibi involving the cabaret show, and must get back to the concert hall as quickly as possible. So, in his haste to get rid of the sack, he might easily have overlooked the piece of wire: in fact, it might have slipped unnoticed out of the sack, which would be the natural place for him to put the wire after the corpses had been slipped off it.

This outline would fit the facts, always provided that Perry could not prove his presence in the concert hall throughout the whole of the cabaret show. But, if he was the Mad Hatter, how had he contrived to post up that notice on Sunday morning and yet be one of the last to leave the bathing-beach? Could he have slipped away so as to reach the notice-board after twelve o'clock, when the secretary had posted her notices, and got back to the beach unobserved? Nigel studied the paper on which Teddy Wise had jotted down for him the approximate times of the duckings. Sally Thistlethwaite, 11.15 a.m.; Albert Morley, 11.30; Mortimer Wise, 12.15. It was soon after this last ducking that the bathers had started returning to Wonderland, with Teddy taking down their identity-disc numbers or names as they left the beach. There was just time for the Mad Hatter to have put up his notice after twelve o'clock and got back for the ducking of Captain Wise. But surely somebody would have noticed him coming or going up the cliff path?"

Nigel gave an irritable exclamation. Why hadn't the management made more extensive inquiries? After this lapse of time, you couldn't trust people's memories. Of course, Captain Wise had not realised then how wide the Mad Hatter's campaign was to be, and he had to exercise great tact with his visitors. But surely——

At this moment the management, in the person of Captain Wise himself, knocked at Nigel's door. He was evidently in a state of ill-repressed indignation.

"Look at this. This has torn it properly," he exclaimed, planking down a copy of the *Daily Post* on Nigel's bed. An inside page carried big headlines:

OUTRAGES AT HOLIDAY CAMP

MALICE IN WONDERLAND

Who is the Mad Hatter?

"How the devil did they get hold of it, that's what I want to know. We took every precaution to see that nothing came out. I even made a public appeal to the residents. I can't believe that any of them would—the managing director has just rung me up and pretty well taken my skin off."

"If none of the residents sent up the story, it means you've had a reporter here."

"But I gave particular orders that no pressmen should be admitted, without being sent to me first."

"You'd need a few companies of the Guards to keep the Press out of this place. No, I expect you'll find it was that chap who was chased off the premises yesterday morning: he seems to have had a good talk with Miss Thistlethwaite and the other Mad Hatter victims."

"By Jove, yes, you're probably right! I'll put a call through to the *Daily Post* at once, and find out. Wish we could sting 'em for libel, but those big papers look after themselves too well nowadays." Captain Wise made for the door, but suddenly halted on an afterthought. "I say, though, how did the *Post* hear about all this in the first instance?"

"The story is by 'our local correspondent,'" said Nigel, glancing at the paper. "Presumably somebody from here rang up the local paper—what is it?"

"The *Applestock Gazette* is the nearest."

"—and spilt the beans. The *Gazette* sends a reporter, and he passes it on to the *Daily Post* or some news agency. I must say, whoever did this story made a very nice job of it——"

"Here. Wait a minute. D'you mean one of the residents gave the show away? But why should he?"

"Cash perhaps. They might offer him a guinea or two for the information. Or quite possibly it was the practical joker himself who rang them up. He's got his publicity now, all right, if that's what he was after."

"And just about put the Wonderland company down the drain, too," said Captain Wise ruefully. "I'll get on to that blasted local rag now."

"I should wait till after breakfast. The editor isn't likely to be in the office till about ten o'clock."

Breakfast at Wonderland that morning was a feast of excitement. Those who possessed copies of the *Daily Post*, which had scooped the Mad Hatter story, were besieged by their fellow residents. The same interest that makes one read every word of the account of a football match, which one has witnessed only the day before, gripped alike the Mad Hatter's victims and those who had merely been spectators of his work. Even Mr. Thistlethwaite kept glancing aside from his copy of the *Times* towards his wife's *Daily Post*. At another table Miss Gardiner was triumphantly pointing out how correctly she had analysed the psychology of the practical joker: "A strong but suppressed sense of display is characteristic of the type," she repeated; "you mark my words—it was the Mad Hatter himself who sent this information to the paper; it's what he's been aiming at all along, to get recognition, to see himself in print."

"I see they've got my name in," said Mr. Morley with pride. "I must buy a copy of the paper. Something to show the fellows in the office. Bad thing for the camp, though; very bad: don't you agree, Mr. Perry?"

"D'you think so? I should have thought any publicity was better than none for a place like this."

"Oh, indeed no, if you'll excuse my contradicting you. As a business man, I can assure you that——"

"What I find interesting," Paul interrupted, "is the way everyone is taking this story as a kind of personal triumph. And incidentally, the general assumption that the Press is omniscient, like God: everyone takes the story for granted, I mean, without asking how the paper came to hear of it."

"I bet it was that man who rubbed my back with oil on the beach," Sally exclaimed. "I wondered why he asked all those questions, and he's got down some of the things I said—in almost the same words."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were right," said Nigel.

"But that doesn't answer the question——" began Paul.

"Ooh, I'm glad it wasn't the Mad Hatter! I've been expecting to come up in boils ever since."

"Which would certainly have spoilt the South Sea effect."

"Did you like our dance last night? I thought it went much better than in rehearsal." Sally smiled at him. It was obviously an overture of peace.

"I didn't see it. Once was quite enough," said Paul stonily. Sally's mouth quivered as if he had struck her. Then she controlled herself and replied, in tones that matched his:

"That's funny, my pet. I should have thought you and your Miss Jones would have taken the opportunity of another hearty laugh."

"Actually, we took the air for a little, instead. Oh, and as Strangeways no doubt has got his ears pricked for an alibi, I must point out that Miss Jones was called away and I was *alone*—for about ten minutes."

"You did not spend that time, I take it, depositing dead animals in people's beds?" asked Nigel with equal effrontery.

"As it happens, no. I just smoked a cigarette and looked at the beautiful night. I felt I'd enjoy it more than the exposure of flesh that was going on inside. My error, evidently."

Paul Perry wiped his mouth, rose, and left the table.

"What a beast he is," Sally muttered self-betrayingly. "I wasn't wearing less than any of the others. Everyone goes about like that in the camp."

"Exiguous though it may be," her father declared, "the modern female costume has the virtues of frankness and hygienic freedom. I should be the last to censure the modern girl on the score of immodesty."

Soon after breakfast Nigel repaired to the manager's office. Esmeralda Jones confirmed that she had gone out of the concert hall with Paul Perry before the South Sea maiden turn began, and had then been called away by one of the staff to answer the telephone. She pointed out, however, that no final conclusions could be drawn from this; for the interval had immediately followed this turn, and during the interval most of the audience had left the hall to take a stroll in the fresh air or visit one of the bars. Nor could the attendant, who had been on duty round the chalets, fix quite accurately the time when he had seen the figure emerge from Nigel's. All he could say was that he thought it was somewhere between 9.30 and 10, and this was elastic enough to cover both the interval and the South Sea turn.

During this conversation, Captain Wise flicked over the papers on his desk in an irresolute, dejected way. Nigel now suggested that they should ring up the *Applestock Gazette* and, Miss Jones having made the connection, waited for Captain Wise to speak. The manager, however, indicated the telephone, and said:

"You'd better handle this, Strangeways. I can't trust myself to speak civilly to them."

Nigel, accordingly, asked to be put through to the editor. He gave his name, said he was a private detective who had been called in by the Wonderland management, and asked if he might interview the reporter whom the *Gazette* had sent yesterday morning to the holiday camp. The editor was at first rather wary. Yes, he admitted presently, his paper was owned by the *Daily Post* company: possibly one of his staff had sent up the story: if Mr. Strangeways would look in at the office during the morning, he might be able to help him further.

"That's that. Could somebody drive me in? We'll take Miss Thistlethwaite, to identify the reporter if necessary. And Wednesday's the day Old Ishmael's to be found at the Mariner's Compass."

Miss Jones raised her delicately-pencilled eyebrows. "You don't still think that he ——?"

"I'm interested in a recluse who frequents pubs. There seems to be a certain contradiction. Do many of the visitors go over to Applestock?"

"When they go anywhere, they go there. But most of them prefer to stay in or near the camp, especially if they're only here for a week."

"Do you suggest one of them is an accomplice of this hermit fellow?" asked Captain Wise.

"Oh, I'm not embarking on any theories yet. There are so many loose ends in the case, the first thing is to get them tidied up."

Captain Wise deputed one of the Wonderland hostesses to drive Nigel into Applestock. Presently Nigel, Sally and Mr. Thistlethwaite were speeding out of the camp in the manager's Lagonda. Quarter of an hour's drive along the coast road brought them to the top of a hill from which they could see Applestock spread out below them. The old part of the town, a huddle of red-tiled houses close by the waterside, formed its nucleus. Westward there were the docks, warehouses and mole of the naval harbour, in which several warships lay. A modern sea-front stretched eastwards: while, straggling up the hill towards them, were streets of new houses, bungalows and shops—an index of the prosperity brought to the town by its naval establishment.

At the office of the *Applestock Gazette* Nigel alighted and, taking Sally with him, was shown up to the editor's room. Mr. Ainsley was a large man, lazy of movement but sharp of eye. After skirmishing with Nigel for a few minutes in a guarded way, and convincing himself that his visitor had come without hostile intent, he sent for Mr. Leeson, his senior reporter. Mr. Leeson lounged into the room, pipe in mouth, and cocked a quizzical eye at Sally, who at once recognised him as the stranger of the bathing beach.

"I hope the sun-tan is coming on nicely, Miss Thistlethwaite," he said.

There was a free-and-easiness about the office that seemed refreshing to Nigel after the formidable atmosphere of certain London editorial rooms with which he was acquainted. Mr. Ainsley gazed ruminatively at the ceiling while Nigel put his questions. Yes, Mr. Leeson had sent up the story to the *Daily Post*. He had gone over to Wonderland in answer to a telephone call received by him the evening before.

"Who was it rang you up?"

"No names were given. A man's voice, I'd say."

"Disguised at all?"

"Well, he didn't squeak or gibber at me. He just said there was some hoky-poky going on in the camp, gave me the names of the victims, said something about a Mad Hatter—I thought it was a hoax at first, but I'd nothing much on the next morning, so I came over. Oh yes, and he warned me that I shouldn't be very popular with the authorities, so I'd better not announce my presence. As it was, I got chased off the premises in the end. The story was worth it, though."

"Did any of the residents you interviewed suspect you were a pressman?"

Mr. Leeson looked slightly wounded, as if this were a reflection on his technique. He admitted, though, that one of the victims, Albert Morley, had asked him if he represented the Press. Nigel professed himself satisfied and turned the conversation to the subject of Old Ishmael. Did they know anything about him, apart from the controversy over the holiday camp in which he had been involved.

"We're the eyes and ears of Applestock and district," said the editor sardonically, cocking one leg over the arm of his chair. "What exactly do you want to know about the old eremite?"

"Does he fly, for instance?"

Sally started, remembering too vividly the flapping, crow-like figure they had met in the wood. The editor was taken aback, too.

"Fly?" he said. "He's not a wizard, as far as I know."

"I mean, is he likely to have taken trips in an aeroplane around here?"

"Christmas, no! He's dead against anything as new-fangled as an aeroplane!"

"Can you buy aerial photographs of this district—Wonderland, Applestock, and so on?"

"Yes. Except of the harbour, of course. No civil aircraft is allowed to fly over that nowadays."

"Has he changed his habits at all lately—during the last year, say?"

"Well, he comes into Applestock more often. It used to be only twice a week, Wednesday and Friday; you could set your calendar by him. Lately I've seen him about occasionally on other days. Nobody pays much attention to him, though. He's a local landmark and taken for granted."

Nigel thanked the editor for his information, and took Sally out again. Together with her father, they set out through the narrowing streets into the old part of the town, and after five minutes' walk reached the Mariner's Compass. It was an old inn which had recently been reconditioned, a brassy, pretentious, glazed-tile affair now. Entering the private saloon, they ordered drinks. By craning round the corner of a partition, it was possible to see into the public bar. Several bluejackets and warrant officers were sitting at round tables or in the high-backed oaken settles that had survived the modernisation of the pub. In a corner apart, on one of these settles, a large sack dumped on the floor beside him, sat Old Ishmael. There was a tankard of beer at his side, and he appeared to be sitting in a kind of stupor, his mouth munching a little from time to time, his eyes fixed trancedly upon a garish cigarette-advertisement on the opposite wall. He was an eccentric figure in that place; ragged, grey-bearded, wrapped in some private contemplation or merely suspended in vacancy: as Mr. Ainsley had said, nobody took any notice of him at all.

"Shall I go in and tug his beard?" whispered Sally. "If it comes away in me 'and, you'll know he's the Mad Hatter."

"You most certainly will do nothing of the sort," Nigel answered firmly. "Besides, a really good false beard won't come off as easily as all that. Spirit gum, my child."

Presently he got into conversation with the landlord. The Mariner's Compass, the man said, catered chiefly for seamen of one sort and another. Now and then holiday visitors dropped in, but the place was a bit rough for them sort, especially of a Saturday night.

"I see you've got Old Ishmael in there?"

"Yes. Regular as clockwork he drops in. Wednesdays and Saturdays. Buys his pint and sits there—for hours, sometimes. The boys offer him a drink now and then, but he never accepts it."

"Does he never talk to anyone? I wonder what he comes in for if he isn't sociable and doesn't want to drink much."

"Living alone up in that wood, I suppose he needs a bit o' company at times. Drive me daffy, it would. No, the only time I ever seen him open his mouth, except to pour beer in, was last year. Just about this time last year, it would be. A gentleman, who was staying over to Swetenham's—that's the farm above the Wonderland holiday camp—this gentleman made him talk. Dunno how he did it. Bloody miracle, if you ask me, begging your pardon, miss. Yes, they were quite thick together, those two."

"What did they talk about?"

"I don't rightly know. Heard 'em on about the holiday camp one evening. The old 'un was evicted, you know, when they built it. I reckon this chap must've got on the soft side of Old Ishmael by cussing at them as promoted the camp."

Sally peered round the edge of the partition again. The recluse was still wrapped in his senile trance. Mechanically, as though some outside will had commanded it, his hand went out to the tankard: he drank, eyes still fixed on the opposite wall or some infinitely more distant horizon: his trembling hand replaced the tankard on the table. Sally felt a little gust of revulsion, as if she had been spying upon a monster that twitched in its sleep. Suddenly the swing-door of the public bar opened and a group of sailors came in, laughing and chattering. They were talking about dog-racing. One of them, a sallow, beady-eyed fellow in naval artificer's uniform, ordered drinks for the rest. He sounded as if it was not the first pub he had visited this morning.

"You got anything for Reading on Saturday, chum?" a companion asked him.

"Reading? There's a dawg running couldn't lose if yer put 'im on roller-skates. He's got it in the bag. In the bag, that's what I say."

"What's 'is name, chum?"

"Blue Blanket," the man shouted. "Put yer money on Blue Blanket and yer needn't never go to sea again. He'll make yer fortunes. Cor, Old Ishmael over there isn't listening. Put yer money on Blue Blanket, Ishmael, and buy yerself a new suit."

"He's deaf, chum. He can't hear yer."

"I'll write it down for him. Never keep a good thing to yourself, that's me, that's Nobby."

The man pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, wrote on it, and thrust it into the recluse's hand. Ishmael, looking up vaguely, caught sight of Sally's face beyond his benefactor's. An extraordinary croaking sound came from his throat: the next moment he had snatched up his sack and was out of the pub.

"Jees, that's Ishmael, that was!"

"Ain't 'arf in a nurry to place his bet!"

"Ooh, the naughty old man—gambling at his age!"

Sally turned a white face to Nigel, who was at her side. The hermit had given her only one look, but that was quite enough for her.

"Did you see——?" she began.

"Yes. I saw quite a lot. Let's push on, shall we?"

They walked up to where the car had been parked. As they drove out of Applestock, Mr. Thistlethwaite, who was sitting at the back with Nigel, cleared his throat and said:

"A highly significant interview, did you not think, sir?"

"Yes, indeed. Have you got a theory now?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite bounced with dignity as the Lagonda hit a rut.

"An alternative theory," he corrected. "I had previously suspected that these outrages were leading up to, and at the same time providing a smoke-screen for, a crime of a more deadly character. I do not at all, as yet, relinquish that theory. But the passages between the hermit and the unknown visitor—I allude, not to the naval person who was behaving in there with such lack of *savoir-faire* and common *politesse*, but to the visitor staying at the Swetenham farm last year—are susceptible of an interesting interpretation."

"You mean, perhaps, that the visitor for some reason entered into a conspiracy with Ishmael?"

"You apprehend me correctly, sir." Mr. Thistlethwaite beamed, then looked

severely sagacious. “Why did the hermit, a notorious misanthrope, so quickly strike up acquaintance with an unknown stranger? The publican heard them talking about the holiday camp. There is our solution, I submit. They both had reasons—different reasons, possibly—for wishing the place ill. They form a compact. They lay their plans. This week we are witnessing the fruit of their machinations.”

“What reason do you suppose the other chap had? And what part is he playing at the moment? If he enlisted the hermit’s aid, it must have been because he could not carry out the practical jokes in person, or unassisted at any rate. Which implies that the hermit has been doing some of them himself. Well, can you imagine that old bag of bones disguising himself as a Wonderland visitor and ducking people in the sea and all?”

“Well, sir. If you put it like that——” Mr. Thistlethwaite looked rather crestfallen. Sally, however, who had been listening, turned round from the front seat and said:

“*I* can. There’s something phony about that horrid old man. I believe he could change his appearance much more easily than you think. There’s something—I don’t know how to describe the feeling he gives me—something *artificial* about him, as if he was put together out of horse-hair and parchment and old doormats.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Thistlethwaite, warming to his work again, “and the reason for the other fellow’s complicity—well, it’s a fact that several rival holiday camps would like to see Wonderland put out of the running: the man might be the agent of one of these. Or is my fancy soaring, sir, beyond the bounds of logic?”

“No,” said Nigel slowly. “It’s not impossible. Something of the sort may be going on.”

XIII

NIGEL DIRECTED THE driver to stop at Mr. Swetenham's farm on the way back. There he revealed the real reason for his presence at Wonderland and made further inquiries about the mysterious visitor of last year. The farmer could give him little help. The visitor, a Mr. Charles Black, had certainly heard the gossip about Ishmael and his feud with Wonderland early during his stay. He had signed the visitors' book, but given as his address only "London": he was a reserved gentleman, the farmer remembered, though agreeable enough—talking little about himself. Nigel asked if Mr. Swetenham by any chance had a photograph of him.

"Funny you should ask that. My eldest kid took a snap of him when he wasn't looking one day. When she developed it and showed it to him, he got into quite a taking. Wanted to buy it off her first—the negative as well, I mean; then threatened to tear it up, joking like, saying he was so ugly he couldn't have photos of himself lying about the place for everyone to look at. In the end he made her promise not to show it around. I dare say she'll have it still. She took a fancy to the gentleman, there's no two opinions about it."

Nigel persuaded the farmer to let him take away the snapshot and the visitors' book: he would return them as soon as possible. The signature might well be in a disguised handwriting, and it was not likely that Charles Black was the gentleman's real name, but the camera at least, which showed him in half profile an oldish, robust-looking, grey-haired man, could not lie.

Returning to the camp, Nigel first showed the photograph, without comment, to the Wise brothers and Miss Jones. None of them recognised its subject, however. He then asked Captain Wise whether it was possible that one of the rival holiday camp companies could be behind the outrages at Wonderland. The manager paused to consider his reply.

"It's not *im*possible," he said at last. "But it's improbable to the highest degree. The Beale people have got their knives into us, I admit—we've put them badly in the shade. But I can't believe they'd resort to such measures as these: it'd ruin them if they were found out."

"I'd like to interview your staff this afternoon, if it could be arranged. Everyone who works in the buildings or on the grounds. Singly."

"That'll be a tall order. We can manage it though, I think. Perhaps you'd like to discuss it with Miss Jones now?"

Nigel and the secretary went into her office, that adjoined the manager's room. Producing a huge time-chart, which showed how every member of the staff was occupied at all times of the day, she rapidly worked out a scheme of interviews for Nigel. Her grasp of detail was quite remarkable: Nigel idly wondered how Captain Wise would fare with the organisation of Wonderland if his talented secretary decided to leave him.

"Do you like doing all this?" he asked. "I suppose you must, or you wouldn't be so good at it."

"It's a job … And it keeps my mind off other things."

"What other things? Or don't I ask that?"

The secretary's full, red lips curved down, in a kind of humorous self-pity. "Oh, the days that might have been. Vanished glories. I was Lysaght Jones's daughter."

"I see." Nigel recollected the crash, three or four years ago, of that brilliant, erratic financier, and his subsequent suicide. "So clever, he cut himself in the end," had been the general verdict on Lysaght Jones. His daughter certainly seemed to have inherited his genius for organisation—and a dash of the mischievous humour which had been his saving charm, Nigel suspected. Here she was, anyway, working for a salary that, a few years ago, might have paid for one of her fur coats.

"And don't tell me how much more ennobling honest toil is than my previous butterfly existence," she went on. "I went through quite a lot after the crash—before I got this job. Old friends of my father who'd love to find something for the little girlie, if she'd just pay them something on account. The usual something. The only currency I possessed. No, it was *not* ennobling."

"Still, you've established yourself all right now."

"Until this damned Mad Hatter turned up. Now I shall have to start looking for a job again."

"Surely it's not as bad as that."

"This publicity's sunk us, my lad, don't you make any mistake. You should have heard Arbuthnot—he's the managing director—on the phone this morning. They can kiss good-bye to Wonderland, and he knows it. Poor Captain Wise—I don't know what he'll do if the place fails. They'd never give him another job, and he'll have nothing to live on."

As they talked, she was making out the order in which Nigel should interview the staff. She threw out her remarks spasmodically, in between the clattering periods of the typewriter. There was a certain contemptuous abandon in the way she worked, as if she didn't care whether typewriter, lists, files, office, and all Wonderland went to perdition the next moment. Now, tearing the sheet out of the machine, she said abruptly:

"For all that, I'd like to catch this bird, even if it is too late. D'you know anything about initiation ceremonies, Nigel Strangeways?"

"Not a great deal. Why?"

"Mr. Paul Perry does. He gave me a lecture on the subject yesterday afternoon."

She stopped, as abruptly as she had begun, took off her spectacles and began to make up her mouth. For all her air of insouciance, she evidently expected something from him.

"You mean, these practical jokes bear a strong resemblance to the tricks played by the older men on the youths during their initiation ceremonies in the New Hebrides, for instance?"

"I see you have points as a detective."

"You'd better tell me just exactly what you've got in mind."

"I don't want to throw accusations about. He seems a nice enough young man, if he is a bit of a solemn prig. Do we believe in the ruthless scientist, outside books? I don't know. Anyway, he's an anthropologist of sorts, batty about his job. He's never had the money or influence to get on to any expeditions. Would he try a little experimenting at home? I don't know. I'm just asking *you*."

"Surely these practical jokes, and people's reactions to them, wouldn't make a very valuable scientific experiment? And he'd hardly go chatting to you about initiation ceremonies a few hours before he put dead animals in people's beds?"

"O.K., then. I'd much rather it was someone else than him."

"You've got something else in mind."

"All right. Why was he so keen to be allowed to see our part of the questionnaire —the answers about the Mad Hatter? They wouldn't contribute anything to his Mass

Observation survey."

"Idle curiosity, perhaps."

"Is a scientist's curiosity ever idle?"

"That's an interesting point. Anything more?"

"Nothing you'd call evidence. But he's got a terrific puritan streak: he was quite devastated by the costume his young woman was wearing in the cabaret, for instance. And where would one expect a puritan to break out more violently than in a place like this, a Babylon of pleasure? Heaven knows, our pleasures here are chaste enough, except for a bit of to-and-fro between the chalets at night; but pleasure of any sort is enough to touch off a really hard-bitten puritan."

Presently Nigel left the girl and went thoughtfully across to his chalet. Here, putting her suggestion out of his mind for the present, he wrote a letter to his uncle, Sir John Strangeways, Assistant Commissioner of Police. Sir John, his favourite uncle and guardian in boyhood days, was still his best friend: indeed, Nigel's youthful hero-worship of him had been an important factor in his own choice of profession. It was tacitly understood between them that Nigel should not trade upon Sir John's position, nor did he call upon his uncle for advice or assistance unless a situation seemed urgently to demand it. As head of the C. department of New Scotland Yard, Sir John had quite enough on his hands already. There were times, however, when Nigel could proceed no further with a case single-handed, and then he placed the facts in a memorandum before Sir John, who would decide whether they justified his lending official support from his own organisation.

Paying no attention to the luncheon gong, Nigel now wrote steadily ahead. There was no need for him to give a full description of the earlier outrages: Sir John could find one in the *Daily Post*; for that matter, in spite of Mr. Leeson's bland assurances, there could be little doubt that the public would be kept well posted about each new event in Wonderland as well.

> "… So you see, my dear uncle," he concluded, "I have at present upward of four hundred single suspects—to say nothing of accomplices, which would create enough permutations and combinations to make even your head reel. Of course, most of these can in fact be reasonably ruled out, but I'm still left with a disagreeably large residue. The only tangible clue points to this Paul Perry, but I'm not altogether satisfied with the motive so far attributed to him. Then there's the mysterious 'Mr. Charles Black,' photograph enclosed. Have your boys got anything on him? Or, alternatively, can you find out for me whether he's connected with any of the other holiday-camp companies, in particular the one that runs Beale, which is Wonderland's chief rival? A third explorable avenue is our Miss Esmeralda Jones: an attractive, intelligent, and I should fancy a-moral young woman, who knows which side her bread is buttered on—and would prefer caviare to butter. Can you tell me whether any of the Wonderland directors were instrumental in the crash which brought down her father, Lysaght Jones? The revenge-motif is a possible one, if a bit far-fetched. But what isn't far-fetched in this dotty case. I'd like, too, any information you may have about Captain Mortimer Wise and his brother Edward. M's reputation is bound up with the camp's, one would presume; but one can't be sure. Any information will be gratefully received. Also, a chit to the local Chief Constable. I've not much time to work in, as great numbers of the visitors only stay for a week and on Saturday I must kiss good-bye to all these potential witnesses. (And why, by the way, has nobody witnessed anything yet except the *faits accomplis*?—I shall just burst into

tears if this Mad Hatter continues to be an Invisible Man as well as a Menace to the Sanctity of the English Holiday.)

"Yours,

"NIGEL."

After sending off this letter, Nigel rang up his uncle and gave him the gist of it: the sooner he could get some concrete information, the better. Sir John promised to do his best. Nigel then ate a packet of milk chocolate and two apples which he had brought with him from London. He was depressed by a sense of anti-climax: even if he discovered the identity of the practical joker, the damage had now been done: Wonderland's reputation, if Captain Wise could be believed, was irreparably ruined. Nor was he himself an inch nearer to the solution of the problem: indeed, by so thoughtfully depositing the dead rabbit in his bed, the Mad Hatter had underlined Nigel's own impotence. Yet he felt that, if he could only correlate and interpret them correctly, he had already received enough indications to set him on the right track.

In the meantime, hard routine work would be the best cure for depression. Interviewing one by one the Wonderland staff took him till nearly five o'clock. The hosts and hostesses, the kitchen and domestic staff, the dance band, the gardeners, the odd-job men—they seemed to come in an endless procession, and to leave him as puzzled as they had found him.

When the last had gone, Nigel sat back to review the little information he had gleaned from them. It was desperately negative. The head-gardener produced a sack which he had found in one of the potting-sheds: it smelt unpleasantly, and was doubtless the one which had been used to convey the dead animals; but anyone might have got into the shed, stolen and replaced the sack. He was a native of this part of the country, and could give Nigel particulars about the preserved coverts in the neighbourhood, so that, if the animals had come from a gamekeeper's gallows, they could be traced back to it. But this, Nigel imagined, would be of little assistance: for the odds were that the Mad Hatter had collected them by night, and cached them somewhere near the camp till the next night came: he must have done so unobserved, or the gamekeeper would have got him. For what it was worth, this supported the theory of an agent, or at least an accomplice, outside the camp. One of the staff, or a visitor, would run a certain risk carrying a sack about, even at night. Whereas Old Ishmael and his sack were such familiar features of the landscape that nobody would pay them much attention.

The dance band and their leader agreed that, when the lights went up after the first public pronouncement of the Mad Hatter, the last pair to be eliminated—Miss Jones and her partner, Paul Perry—were nearer to the microphones than anyone else. But this meant nothing. Had either of theirs been the voice that had come through the loud-speakers, you would expect them to have put a greater distance between themselves and the microphones before the lights went up. Nobody yet had a convincing alibi for this moment except Teddy Wise and Miss Thistlethwaite, who were under the spotlight towards the far end of the hall. Miss Jones had already told Nigel that, when she and Paul were counted out, they separated in the darkness. So either of them *could* have done it. But so could any number of others in the hall, to say nothing of a person entering through the side doors by the platform.

Nor did Nigel obtain any relevant information about the duckings. Two or three of the staff, as well as the Wises, had been on the beach at various times that morning. They had not noticed anyone climbing the cliff path or returning around midday. Nor were they at all agreed as to who had been nearest the victims at the

time of the duckings.

After asking each member of the staff a series of more particular questions, Nigel inquired whether he knew anyone who had any sort of grievance against the company or management, whether he had seen any of the visitors acting at any time in a suspicious or even unusual manner, and whether he had heard any gossip amongst the visitors suggesting some special knowledge of their own. Nigel hoped for some result from this last question at any rate, since these residents would not be likely to have maintained any of the upper-middle-class reticence before servants.

Yet, in spite of this, he gleaned little. The answers to the first question were remarkably unanimous: there was no doubt that, as Miss Jones had said, Captain Wise was thoroughly popular with his staff. As one of the waitresses put it, "he's a real gentleman—makes you feel it's a pleasure to work for him and the camp, listens to any complaints you have, and never goes behind your back. Reckon he's the making of this place—ought to pay him a much higher salary than they do, that's what I say. Nor did anyone reveal, or appear to be trying to conceal, a grudge against the company.

The only item that made Nigel prick up his ears was an apparently irrelevant comment by one of the hostesses. "The only person in this camp who might fairly feel a bit annoyed with us is that funny little chap, Mr. Morley. 'Albert,' everyone calls him. They're always ragging him about something or other, but he's as good-tempered as——"

"'Annoyed with *us*,' you said. Do the staff go in for teasing him, too, then?"

"Oh, of course not, Mr. Strangeways. Captain Wise'd be down like a ton of bricks on that. Why, on Sunday morning he stopped his brother, and Teddy was really meaning no harm."

Nigel elicited the story of the beach-ball baiting, and later, from another witness, the episode in the shooting-gallery. They didn't, he reflected, amount to much, even after he had discovered that Mr. Morley had been equally a general butt on his first visit to the camp last year. This might have created in the little man a feeling of resentment towards his fellow visitors and Teddy Wise, and Nigel did not assume that a man who apparently takes a joke in good part may not also be taking it very much to heart; but it was difficult to imagine Albert Morley retaliating in this grim and wholesale manner: besides, Nigel remembered now, Albert had an alibi for the period when the dead animals were distributed, for Mr. Thistlethwaite had mentioned jokingly in the car this morning that he and Mr. Morley could vouch for each other over that—they having sat together at dinner, adjourned to the bar afterwards, sat beside each other during the cabaret, and smoked a cigarette together during the interval.

The answers to Nigel's second question added up to exactly nothing. His third produced little evidence either, except of the solidarity, the community-spirit which communicated itself to the staff as well as the residents of Wonderland. Most of his witnesses were quite evidently uneasy about repeating any gossip they might have heard which was likely to do further damage to the camp. The only exception to this meritorious unhelpfulness was the chief saxophone player in the dance band, a rather greasy and self-assured young man with a small black smut of a moustache, who commented knowingly:

"Gossip? We don't have no scandal here, old man—I *don't* think. All boys and girls together, and does that go for the management or does that go for the management?"

"Well, does it?" asked Nigel distastefully.

"I'm not talking, old man. If Cap Wise likes to keep his bit of sugar on the premises, that's O.K. by me. We're not living in the Middle Ages, are we?"

"Bit of sugar?" queried Nigel, leering horribly. "What price a nice big Emerald?"

"I don't get you—oh, I see. Emerald. Esmeralda. Trust the good old sleuth to sniff it out. Mind you, old man, they're discreet. Take a letter, Miss Jones. Certainly, Captain Wise. But they can't fool Artie Foscuro. It'd burn you up, if I told you what I'd seen——"

"What was it Miss Jones didn't like about you?" said Nigel with chilly emphasis. "Your manners? Or that disgusting moustache?"

"Here, old man, draw it mild——" Artie's voice degenerated from bogus American to whining Cockney. "I mean to siy——"

"Say it somewhere else. Good afternoon."

Before the saxophonist had gone, Nigel was reproaching himself. He disliked very much people who took a high hand or a moral tone with chance witnesses. Hadn't I asked for gossip? Why then talk like a heavy house-master when I got it? The reason is, reflected Nigel, who seldom missed an opportunity for catching himself out in intellectual dishonesty, partly that I am getting irritable over the cumulative futility of all these interviews, and partly that I must be feeling a shade protective towards Esmeralda Jones myself. And when a man begins to feel protective towards a woman, it's high time for someone to start protecting *him*.

When the interviews were over, Nigel decided that as a penance he would read through the note-book in which Paul Perry jotted down the gossip he picked up in the camp. It was a penance, however, which had to be deferred, for he had only just opened the note-book when Dr. Holford entered, looking worried.

"I'm not at all satisfied with Miss Arnold's condition," he said at once. "The scars left by the blisters are unusually fragile, and the silly girl left off her bandages yesterday morning, she now admits. To tell you the truth, the wounds are septic. And she's not got much resistance. I think she ought to be removed to hospital."

"I see. Yes," said Nigel, after a pause. "Is she willing to go?"

"That's the trouble."

"Would it be all right for me to have a few words with her alone? I might be able to persuade her."

"Certainly. It's very good of you."

Phyllis Arnold was looking flushed, and evidently in pain, when Nigel went to visit her. She still, however, refused obstinately at first to consent to the doctor's plan.

"It's a matter of principle," she said.

"We respect you for it. But the fact is you may be safer away from the camp. It's possible that you are the real object of this series of horrible jokes."

"Oh, Mr. Strangeways, whatever do you mean?" The girl was alarmed, but also gratified—the effect Nigel had been aiming at. It was not often that life gave her the opportunity of being the centre of a picture.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you any more." (That is true, at any rate, thought Nigel.) "But you'd be doing me a great favour, if——"

"I'll do it, then. I always say the good of the community ought to come before one's private scruples—don't you agree, Mr. Strangeways?"

"I think this is an instance when it should, anyway. Now I just want to ask you a few questions and then I won't disturb you any more. Please tell no one, *absolutely* no one, what I have asked you."

"I promise." Miss Arnold's flush was now at least partly one of excitement.

“First, did anyone in the camp, staff or residents, know that you would be susceptible to this wild parsley stuff or to blood-poisoning? Could they even have heard about it from someone outside the camp altogether—in your family or your office, say?”

“Really, I don’t think so. Only my friend, Janice, that is. You see, we didn’t know any of the other visitors, not till we came here. Janice knew I had blood-pois—I mean, what the doctor called blood-poisoning, two years ago. But I’ve never touched any wild-parsley before. Mind you, I’m ever so keen on botany. But I don’t approve of picking wild flowers—I always say they ought to be left where God put them.”

“I see. Well then, have you any reason to suppose that either Captain Wise, or his secretary, or his brother, could have a grudge against you. Don’t be shocked at the idea. I have to ask these questions, and they often lead to nothing. Just think hard.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Strangeways, I’m sure that’s quite impossible. Why, I’d never even met any of them before——” The girl stopped suddenly. “Not as you’d say, met.”

“Yes?” Nigel murmured encouragingly.

“Well, I did *see* them once—Captain Wise and Miss Jones, that is. My uncle took me to a restaurant in Soho for dinner, a few months ago. They were dining there. I didn’t know who they were, of course; but I happened to notice them because Mr. Leyman was sitting at the next table, and leaning across to chat with them. He’s connected with holiday camps, too—Mr. Leyman, I mean. I knew that, because he came into our office one day—I work for an architect’s firm—and this Mr. Leyman had come to look over some plans.”

“That all sounds harmless enough. Captain Wise could scarcely have a grievance against you for dining in the same restaurant.”

Miss Arnold reddened in confusion. “Well, no, he couldn’t, except—I do hate hinting scandal——”

“Never mind. You never know what may come in useful for this investigation. Did you mention to either of them that you’d seen them before, when you arrived at the camp? When did you come, by the way?”

“Last Saturday. That’s just it, Mr. Strangeways. Miss Jones was standing on the terrace, and I just remarked that I’d seen her and Captain Wise at this Soho restaurant, and what a nice little place it was, ever so select, I mean, and the best French cooking, of course, my uncle being a real epicure as he always says—and she got quite snooty. Well, I mean, I wasn’t trying to hint anything, I’m not a person to talk scandal, and besides it had never even entered my head: but Miss Jones gave me a look and said that Captain Wise was her employer and it was quite a common thing for employers and secretaries to have a meal together if there was sort of overtime to be done. Well, those weren’t her exact words, of course, but it was what she meant. Warning me off the grass. Sort of humorously, she said it, but I thought there must be a bit more behind it than——”

“You thought *she* thought you were hinting at an affair between her and Captain Wise?”

“Yes, Mr. Strangeways. But I’m sure I never meant to do anything of the sort.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. No doubt, in a place like this, they have to be very careful there’s no trace of scandal about the management, and that’s what led her to misunderstand your meaning. Well, I’m glad we’ve cleared that up. Shall I ask your friend, Janice, to help you pack?”

This gave him an excuse to question Janice Mears at once; but the girl assured him that she had not talked to anyone in the camp about Miss Arnold’s blood-poisoning of two years ago, her friend being sensitive on the subject. This avenue of

inquiry appeared, therefore, to peter out. Even if imagination could stretch so far as to suppose that Captain Wise and Miss Jones would adopt so roundabout a method as the Mad Hatter's tricks to silence Miss Arnold over their own liaison, it was now proved that they could not have known of her idiosyncrasy for wild parsley or her tendency to blood-poisoning.

Nigel wished he had not sent off the snapshot of the mysterious "Mr. Charles Black." Phyllis Arnold might have recognised in him the Mr. Leyman who was "connected with holiday camps," and had been talking to Captain Wise in the Soho restaurant. Or she might not, he reflected ruefully; the odds were a thousand to one against it. Still, any straw when you're drowning. Nigel scribbled a note to his uncle, asking whether the photo by any chance was that of a Mr. Leyman, connected with holiday camps. Captain Wise and Miss Jones had declared that they did not recognise the subject of the photo, but they might have had some private reason for that.

A firm believer in shock tactics, if sparingly employed, Nigel went up to the manager's office, smiled abstractedly upon him and Miss Jones, and said without preamble:

"This Mr. Leyman—is he a business rival of yourself?"

The effect of his question was notable indeed. Captain Wise stiffened, opened his mouth, but no words emerged. Nigel fancied that the pair had exercised superhuman self-control in not glancing at each other; their eyes were too studiously fixed upon his own. At last, when the silence had become almost intolerable, Miss Jones said:

"We'd better tell him, Mortimer."

"Esmeralda, have you gone mad?" Captain Wise's voice was stormy, but it was Miss Jones who seemed to control the elements of the situation.

"Have you been hearing some scandal about Captain Wise and myself?" she asked coolly enough, her red lips turned down at the corners in half-humorous resignation.

"Yes." Nigel outlined his conversation with the saxophonist and Miss Arnold, stressing that the latter had had no intention to offend.

"Answering your first question, Mr. Leyman is behind Beale and other holiday camps, so he's certainly a business rival," the girl continued. "The reason your question struck us all of a heap for a moment is that—well, he's one of the men I told you about who tried to take advantage of the helpless orphan when my father died. As you've probably guessed, Mortimer and I are very fond of each other. Our friendship dates from a certain occasion when he arrived rather opportunely in a room where Mr. Leyman was pursuing his advantage."

"I see. Was Leyman vindictive about it? Would he, for instance, organise the funny business that's been going on here, just to get his own back on you?"

"Well, I don't really think——" began Captain Wise, who had recovered his balance.

"Of course you don't! No, Mr. Strangeways, you can put that out of your head. Leyman was quite affable when we ran into him in that restaurant. He's a bit light-fingered with the dames, but there's no real vice in him. He'd not bear malice. And he's certainly got quite enough on his hands in the ordinary way of business to keep him from organising a campaign to discredit us here. If he'd wanted to ruin Mortimer and myself, he's quite powerful enough to do it by more orthodox business methods —you know, a word in the ear of one of our own directors after a good dinner."

"I may take it, then, that he's still not the gentleman in the snapshot I showed you?"

"You may." Miss Jones's eyes twinkled. "Wouldn't poor Tubby Leyman's ears burn if he knew how hard Mr. Strangeways was trying to incriminate him!"

“Yes. Well now,” said Captain Wise, the efficient organiser again, his intonation suggesting that further levity on such sacred subjects as Big Business Men was undesirable, “if there’s nothing more at the moment, Strangeways——?”

XIV

"WHAT DO YOU think of the detective?" asked Sally. "Very quiet, isn't he? Funny, the way he looks at you—as if he was working out to three places of decimals, and then taking away the number he first thought of."

"'Looking at *you*'? D'you mean looking at me, or just at people?"

"People, of course, silly. You're not the only pebble on the beach."

"I wonder. He suspects me of being the Mad Hatter, I'm sure. Sometimes I begin to suspect myself."

"Don't talk daft, Paul. Just because a silly old bit of wire is found under your chalet——"

"How did you know that?" Paul asked sharply.

"Why, you told me. Didn't you? It must have been Daddy, then. Anyway, I'll tell Mr. Smart-Alec Strangeways you couldn't have put those animals in the people's beds. I know you couldn't."

"How d'you know that?"

Sally pointed to the bottom of the boat, where a dead mackerel lay.

"You wouldn't cut a piece off that fish for fresh bait, not even when you were sure it was dead. You hate touching dead things, don't you?" she said triumphantly.

"You're getting quite bright. Yes, I do. But it's no good," Paul added despondently: "that's not what a detective would call evidence."

"More fool him. I believe he *would* listen to me, anyhow. He's nice. I'm getting rather to like high-brows."

Paul, rowing mechanically, did not rise to this, one way or the other. He stared over Sally's bright hair at the distant headland.

"Who are you staring at? I suppose Miss Jones is on the cliff, watching you with a jealous eye."

"Don't be absurd. I've just got my eye fixed on a mark, so that I can row straight."

"You do take everything so seriously, don't you, my pet?"

"I don't take Miss Jones seriously."

Sally averted her head, and began twitching at the line she held over the stern. In a tone of marked cheerfulness, she cried:

"Row faster! The fish won't take the bait if you drag along like a wet Sunday."

Paul drove in the oars more vigorously, and the boat moved faster through the sea, which slapped its bows and chuckled beneath the keel. Westward, the cliffs were losing their identity in uniform shadow, while to the east they held the light of the declining sun in a tranquil embrace, cliff and sunlight melting together and transmuted into a relief of delicate, chased gold.

Looking over his right shoulder, Paul could see the beach, the landslide, the top of the Wonderland building above, the glass at one end of the "Captain's bridge" glowing like a fire-opal. There was something baleful about that glow. Fancifully, he compared it with the wicked flame from a plague-pit. Wonderland had been infected: the disease was breaking out everywhere: and the carrier——? Shuddering, he looked away. The sea, at least, was clean. Its clean salt lay on his lips and on Sally's golden arms. As long as they stayed out at sea, they were safe, free from the general defilement.

Obeying a perverse, obscure impulse, he drove in his left oar and headed the boat for the land.

“Oh, don’t let’s go in yet! It’s lovely out here.”

“It’s getting on for dinner-time. There’s hardly anyone left on the beach.”

“Who cares? We’ll stay out all night and catch fish by moonlight. And bathe. I’ve always wanted to bathe naked in the moonlight. It’s romantic.”

“We’d die of cold.”

“And next morning they’d find two poor, pale corpses, side by side on the sand. That’d be romantic, too.”

“Not for the corpses.”

“Stop! I’ve got a fish!”

Slowly she pulled in the line. The spinner shot up through the water towards them, like a sportive trick of light. There was nothing on the hook but a piece of seaweed. Paul began to row again.

“You might wait till I’ve caught one more fish. Just a little one.”

“No. We’re late.”

“I don’t believe you want to stay out all night with me.”

“If I did, Strangeways would think we’d run away. Tantamount to a confession of guilt.”

“Oh, damn Strangeways. *I* know you didn’t do it, so what does it matter?”

“Supposing *I* don’t know, though?”

“What it really is—you want to get away from me. This stupid girl, throwing herself at my head … Isn’t it?”

“Well, you said it. I didn’t.”

Sally’s face went white. She tried to coil up the line, but it seemed to have got into impossible tangles. A childish desolation came over her. She would have liked to weep salt tears all over the salty, dripping line.

In silence, they pulled the boat on to the beach. Albert Morley, who had been watching them, helped to drag it above high-water mark. As soon as this was done Paul set off up the cliff path alone.

“Did you have successful fishing, Miss Sally?” said Albert awkwardly, perceiving that something was wrong. He couldn’t have known, though, how appalling the phrase would sound to her. She took the mackerel out of the boat, said, “Just this,” and stumbling down to the edge of the sea flung the fish far out.

“Oh, but that was quite a nice fish,” he protested.

“And I’d like to throw myself after it!” she exclaimed.

“Well, Miss Sally,” said Albert, after an awkward pause, “there are more fish in the sea than ever came out of it.”

“Oh God!”—Sally was half laughing, half crying—“I’m not setting up a fishmonger’s shop, am I? You sounded as if—I’m sorry, Albert, I didn’t mean to break out at you. Let’s go back.”

“Yes. I mustn’t be late to-night.”

“Why?”

“I’m taking a little part in the show after dinner.”

“Are you? That’s splendid.” Sally did not mean her intonation to be that of a grown-up commending a child’s achievement. Nor, apparently, did Albert Morley take it as such. Stumbling among the boulders at the foot of the cliff-path, blushing a little and bobbing his head, but resolute of countenance, he said:

“Has that young man—I mean, is he responsible for—has he hurt you? Because if he has——”

“Oh, no. We’re just both a bit upset. You see, he thinks he is suspected of being the Mad Hatter.”

Mr. Morley nearly fell off the narrow cliff-path. “Oh but, bless my soul, surely that’s impossible! He was most kind to me, most—from the first moment we met.”

“I *know* it’s impossible. But—well, the detective found a clue which rather points to him. And he’s behaving so queerly himself. Why can’t he tell me what’s wrong? It makes me so miserable.”

“Pride, Miss Sally. Pride. Depend upon it, that’s what’s behind it. It always is, with young people. I remember when I was your age——” Albert Morley sighed dramatically, tripped over a root and fell flat on his face. Fate, it seemed, would never allow him to be anything but the comic relief. No sooner was he on the point of establishing himself as a tragic, or at least a romantic figure—victim of some youthful, heart-breaking disaster, than Fate interposed a root before his feet. Even in his disasters, Fate decreed, he must remain a figure of fun.

“There you are,” he remarked characteristically as Sally helped him up. “Pride goeth before a fall. There was I, just giving you some lofty advice, and down I came. Still, remember, my dear, pride doesn’t pay any dividends.”

“It’s not me who’s proud,” she said desolately, recollecting too vividly how she had cast aside all pride in the boat, and how brutally Paul had wounded her as a result.

“Perhaps he thinks he oughtn’t to say anything to you while he’s suspected of these outrages,” suggested Mr. Morley, an anxious half-smile on his chubby face.…

It was there again, three hours later, in the concert hall where the male visitors were giving a short vaudeville programme assisted by some members of the staff. Albert Morley was dressed for the occasion, too. He was dressed, to be exact, in knickerbockers, Norfolk coat, Eton collar and school cap: his chubby, rubicund cheeks had been turned into caricatures of themselves with grease-paint; and he was sitting upon Edward Wise’s knee, in the character of a ventriloquist’s doll.

The audience, easily enough pleased by any turn, were in paroxysms of laughter at this one. For Teddy was an excellent showman as well as a good ventriloquist, and the topical dialogue—behind which Nigel seemed to detect the quick wit of Esmeralda Jones—would have been enough to satisfy a more exacting audience. Yet Albert Morley was, in one sense at least, the clou of the performance. His absurd appearance, as though like the celebrated parent in *Vice Versa* he had indeed suddenly been transformed into his schoolboy self; the pert, adenoidal voice which Teddy Wise put into his mouth; but, above all, the comically anxious concentration with which he strove to make his lips follow the course of the words that Teddy gave him—this it was that brought the house down. Nigel realised what the woman had meant when she told him about the baiting of Albert Morley. Teddy was, undoubtedly, making fun *of* the little man as well as *through* him: and the audience were laughing, with the rather frightening, cumulative unkindness of a crowd, as much at Albert himself as at the part he played.

“Now don’t you be cheeky, or I’ll tell the Mad Hatter of you,” said Teddy.

“Ow, teacher, I’ll be good!” piped Albert, bouncing animatedly on Teddy’s knee. “Tell you a riddle, mister. What’s the difference between you and the Mad Hatter?”

“What’s the difference between me and the Mad Hatter? Quite a lot, I hope. Let’s see now, let’s see——”

“Give it up, cock? I’ll tell yer. He’s nuts and you’re to be Queen of the May, you handsome thing!”

Teddy turned the puppet Albert across his knee, and began to spank him soundly as the curtain fell.

Nigel, going out to smoke a cigarette, was presently joined by Mr. Thistlethwaite.

An expression of strong intellectual excitement was upon the tailor's face, but he launched into speech with the unhurried dignity of a liner gliding down a slipway.

"On a beautiful night like this, sir," he opened," it seems almost a desecration to introduce the sordid topic of criminality."

"It does indeed."

Mr. Thistlethwaite inclined his head to Nigel, gave the night a look of dignified apology, and continued.

"We are in deep waters, I fancy, sir. Very deep waters. I have been giving some attention to this matter of the hermit, Old Ishmael, and my reasoning has forced me to a certain conclusion."

Mr. Thistlethwaite lowered his voice on the last phrase, for Paul Perry was approaching.

"Three heads might be better than two," suggested Nigel.

"As you will, sir. Mr. Perry, I was just about to tell Mr. Strangeways of my conclusions concerning the recluse."

"Oh yes?" Paul's voice concealed curiosity beneath a sceptical negligence.

"Briefly stated, they are this—the recluse," hissed Mr. Thistlethwaite, "is a spy!"

"Did he tell you that?" asked Paul irreverently.

"Please, Mr. Perry, please."

"Pray continue. This is really very interesting." Nigel's voice was perfectly serious.

"Let us take a turn in the direction of the bowling-green. Perambulation, sir, if I may so put it, is the best aperitif for thought. Our young friend's scepticism, though natural, is ill judged: for he himself held in his own hands the first link of the evidence."

"You refer, no doubt, to the aerial photographs?"

"Ah, Mr. Strangeways, I see there is no anticipating you."

"But a chap isn't a spy just because he has aerial photographs in his possession," Paul protested. "Anyone can get hold of them."

"Justly observed. But my daughter, Sally, when I questioned her, vaguely recollected that at least one of these photographs depicted a dockyard. She is by no means sure of this. Taken in conjunction, however, with the fact that this self-styled, or shall I say ci-devant?—hermit is in the habit of spending two days of the week in the naval port of Applestock, and visiting a public house much frequented by naval ratings, the point has its significance."

"Very good, Mr. Thistlethwaite," Nigel commended. "Had you not taken up another profession, you might by now be an ornament of Scotland Yard."

Mr. Thistlethwaite was vastly gratified. "I own myself a mere amateur," he deprecated. "But not perhaps altogether lacking in flair. The sartorial vocation demands a certain gift for sizing up a subject, for determining the material that will best set off his physical lineaments, for suiting the cloth to the character. Here a touch of bravura is indicated: there, a more demure effect. In a word, we cut the cloth to suit not only the purse but the personality. A similar gift, may I venture to suggest?—is required for the detection of crime. You, sir, having studied your crime from every angle, have measured it up in each particular, then proceed to—however, I digress. Let us return to Old Ishmael What would be his motive for so dastardly a betrayal of his own country? I will answer you in one word. Vengeance."

Mr. Thistlethwaite glared horribly upon his audience, blew his nose, and continued.

"Never a good citizen—for as a recluse he had long disregarded all social

obligations, he conceived a positive hatred for society, and particularly for the government of his country when he was evicted from his shack upon these cliffs. At first this hatred expresses itself in childish acts of reprisal against the holiday camp: he strews nails on the road, and so forth But presently a more sinister opportunity is revealed to him. A certain Mr. Charles Black comes to stay with the farmer, Swetenham: he goes out on the cliffs with field-glasses: he objects to being photographed. Such conduct is not that of an honest man. Mr. Black hears about Old Ishmael, and seeks acquaintance with him. They are seen together in Applestock. Mr Black is unquestionably an enemy agent. But he dare not himself undertake the work of espionage in Applestock. Instead playing upon the recluse's grievance, he suborns him to the flagitious task. Here is an instrument ready to his hand. Old Ishmael is an established figure in the town: we ourselves noticed how he sat in the Mariner's Compass, and nobody paid the least attention to him. He is even presumed to be deaf. One of the chief tasks of a spy is to collect information, which he sends in to a central bureau that pieces it together with fragments sent in from a whole network of spies. Our gallant sailors so rightly nominated 'the Silent Service,' are the last men to accuse of wilful indiscretion. But who could blame them if from time to time they talked a little too freely in the presence of Old Ishmael—the recluse, the harmless, deaf eccentric? Why, he scarcely existed for them as an individual at all. I say, one would impute no deliberate misdemeanour to so fine a body of men as our tars. But even in the healthiest body there may be one or two evil——"

"The little matter of the betting-slip," murmured Nigel.

"Just so. Why, confound it, Mr. Strangeways, I believe you were on to the whole thing long ago." The tailor sounded considerably dashed, and Nigel hastened to reassure him.

"It is very encouraging to find that your judgment supports my own suspicions. As you say, if that chap had wanted to pass on some information to Old Ishmael, he couldn't have chosen a less suspicious way than that of jotting down a tip for a greyhound race on a piece of paper which contained the information, and passing it over in full view of everyone. Still, we mustn't build too much on it. It's a bit flimsy as a clue. If only we could have another look at those aerial photographs! But he'd probably have got rid of them by now. You didn't notice, I suppose, whether any of them depicted a harbour, Perry?"

"No. I—we were too excited at finding the one of the holiday camp."

"Nobody's allowed to fly over those docks; so, if he had photographs of them, they must have been passed on to him by someone in the Air Arm. However, that'll be taken in hand by other people."

They began walking back towards the concert hall. On the way, Paul Perry remarked:

"Talking of clues, Mr. Thistlethwaite, how did you know that a certain piece of wire was found underneath my chalet last night? I didn't realise you were in Strangeways' confidence to that extent."

"My dear sir, you forget that your chalet is only a matter of twenty yards or so from mine. I could hear almost every word of the conversation that occurred."

"Oh hell! Everyone seems to be a detective in this damned place!" Paul exclaimed, and flung himself off.

"Tck, tck, tck. The young gentleman is very much on edge, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Nigel thoughtfully. "Yes, he is … Tell me, now; how long have you known Mr. Morley?"

They had met him first on their visit to Wonderland last year, Mr. Thistlethwaite

said. He had attached himself to them rather as a lost dog attaches itself to the first human being who gives it a kind word, Nigel imagined. Not that he was an unhappy man. He just had that air of being lost, eager for some human attachment; and no doubt it was this which found a response in Sally's warm heart. He worked at a shipping office, and lived alone in rooms, said Mr. Thistlethwaite. He was the kind, thought Nigel, whom a landlady would either mother or fleece abominably; it depended on the landlady.

"Always taking up some new hobby, and then dropping it, I gather," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "One time it was chemistry. Then he started to learn Esperanto. Now he's all for astronomy—only the other day he said he wished he could afford a telescope."

"It's typical of the romantic, that, isn't it? Always starting something new, and giving it up because they don't become perfect at it in a few days. The ineffectual day-dreamer."

"Ineffectual, sir? I wonder. Still waters run deep."

"Some still waters don't run at all." If Mr. Thistlethwaite was hinting anything, Nigel did not appear to realise it.

On their left, they could see the fairy lights strung like Wool-worth jewellery above a crescent of chalets. The trees seemed as if cut out of black cardboard. Over there, a member of the staff, conspicuous in his white trousers, was strolling around, flashing an electric torch; it was about this time last night that the Mad Hatter had acted; but surely he would not repeat himself here, now the place was so carefully patrolled. From the concert hall they could hear the strains of a sea-shanty. The interval was over. Nigel left Mr. Thistlethwaite at the door of the big building, and went off by himself to do the rounds of the camp. Three times, at different points, he was challenged; the watchers were certainly on the *qui vive* to-night. If nothing happened before midnight, Nigel reflected, this would have been the Mad Hatter's first blank day. Was it just that he dared do nothing further, or had his object now been achieved?

Nigel went to his own chalet, turned on the light, and settled down to read Paul Perry's gossip note-book. There was a good deal more of it than Nigel had expected. Perry had a good verbal memory and was painstaking to a degree; he must have put down extracts from all the conversations he had heard; certain of these were underlined neatly in red ink—extracts, Nigel presumed, which revealed the viewpoints, characteristics, habits, special reactions of camp residents. It was not these, however, which engaged Nigel's attention so much as one or two others, scattered about in the book, apparently irrelevant, but underlining and bringing into high relief Nigel's own tentative theory. He believed he now knew the identity and motive of the Mad Hatter. Yet it would still be as difficult as ever to present valid proofs. And there was still a great deal to be done.

Nigel went out again, in search of Teddy Wise. The vaudeville performance had been over for nearly an hour, and Teddy was recuperating at the bar.

"Cheerio, Sherlock, what's yours?" he said.

Nigel said a whisky and soda, and Teddy threw a ten-shilling note down on the bar. He was evidently a bit more even than his usual expansive self. An empty stomach, Nigel reflected, is not the only empty thing you can get drunk on: the stage artist, keyed up, filled with nervous tension before he goes on, is emptied by his performance and becomes eminently vulnerable to alcohol. Teddy, for all his hearty, obtuse exterior, was a genuine artist in his way. Neurotic too, suspected Nigel, who had often contemplated writing a monograph on the neurotic tendencies of the

athlete.

"You don't get your drinks free, then?" he said.

"No fear, old boy. Luckily for my morale."

"Your brother does, though, he told me."

"Oh, you've seen his little private bar? That's technically for entertainment purposes only. Well, there's nothing to stop him entertaining himself now and then. Considering the mingy salary he gets, I'm surprised he doesn't take more advantage of his little extras."

Teddy Wise was sober enough to talk in lowered tones, for the bar was being well patronised to-night.

"What do they pay him? £1000 a year? That sort of thing?"

"Not by a longish chalk. Look here, can't go on all night talking in stage whispers —bad for the uvula. Let's go and have a yarn in my luxury apartment."

This was exactly what Nigel wanted. Presently they were sitting over a bottle of whisky in Teddy's room, which was at the top of the Wonderland building—a floor above the manager's office. Luxury apartment was just the word for it. With its built-in cupboards and electric fire, its moss-thick carpet, chromium writing-table and strip lights, it was all luxury and no comfort. Teddy Wise, who looked so very far from at home in it, had done nothing to make it look more homely. Noticing Nigel's politely dismayed expression as he surveyed the room, Teddy Wise said:

"Pretty awful, isn't it? Any visitors who trot along to see me are meant to be impressed by the room and tell everyone how well the company looks after its employees."

But that scarcely explains its anonymous appearance, thought Nigel: not even a photograph on the mantelpiece or a rugger cap hung up on a picture. He said:

"I've never been in one of these camps before. It's extraordinarily interesting. Your brother must be a first-rate organiser. I suppose he's had a good deal of experience."

"Well, he was secretary of a golf club before he came in here. That, and the army, were all the organising he'd done. But Mortie always falls on his feet."

Nigel detected some bitterness beneath the young man's tone. Jealousy, was it—of a brother who had always taken the limelight? Of set purpose, he continued to praise Mortimer Wise. Presently Teddy, who had been making further inroads upon the whisky, interrupted.

"Yes, that's what everyone says. I don't mind telling you, though, old man, he'd be nowhere without Esmeralda. She's the live wire, believe you me."

"Surprising to find a girl with her looks and talents in a job like this. You'd have thought she'd have done better for herself."

"How d'you mean, 'done better'?"

"Well, made a rich marriage, for instance."

There was a rather tortured look on Teddy's handsome face. He said:

"Rich marriage? Yes, she'd like her bit of luxury. She was born to it. But she likes my esteemed brother even better."

There was no question now of the bitterness in his voice. So Teddy's bitten, too, thought Nigel.

"He's a good deal older than you, isn't he?"

"What are you getting at?" Teddy said.

"I mean's he's rather old for her, isn't he?" Nigel replied obliquely.

"You know, old boy, I'm sure you're the sleuth of the century and all that: but you can't fool Teddy Wise. Have a spot more? Say when. I can see you're leading up

to the big moment. Why doesn't Esmeralda prefer the eligible young Teddy to the doddering old Mortie—that's the ruddy rub, isn't it?"

"Well——"

"Don't apologise, my dear fellow. No offence taken. You've got your job to do. The answer is, I don't know. But she does. And where do we go from there? Burning with jealousy and frustrated passion, the younger brother sets out to ruin the elder. Damn you, he hissed, I'll get even with you yet. And so the Mad Hatter was born. Bring out your handcuffs."

Nigel laughed. "That's a very spectacular confession. You ought to be on the stage. By the way, I enjoyed your turn tonight. I hope Albert Morley did, too."

"Oh, he doesn't mind. He's used to it. Cheery little chap—you can't keep him down."

"Does dramatic talent run in your family?"

"Aha! Sherlock on the job again. I suppose it does. Mortie used to be pretty hot on impersonations. I say—you're very inquisitive about the old boy, aren't you? If you've got the idea that he's the Mad Hatter, you'll have to think again. Oh, I know the gag—it was just a routine question. But seriously, if this camp goes down it'll be the finish of Mortie. You can count him out."

Nigel changed the subject to Old Ishmael. He learnt that about this time last year the recluse had disappeared from his usual haunts for several weeks.

"I used to clock in once a week at the Mariner's Compass," Teddy said, "and they told me he'd not been showing up there."

After a little more conversation, Nigel said good-night and went off to his chalet. It was a moonless, velvety summer night, surprisingly dark now that the fairy lights had been extinguished. Looking at his wrist-watch as he took off his coat, he saw that it was nearly one o'clock. He put the watch down on the dressing-table. The next instant he was startled out of his skin by a loud explosion.

Sally Thistlethwaite, who had not yet been able to go to sleep, started out of bed. For a moment she thought the explosion had taken place in the chalet, so violently did it break into her drowsy senses. She ran outside, her father close behind her. Everyone seemed to be tumbling out of the chalets nearby: the Mad Hatter's outrages had keyed up people's nerves, so that they hardly knew what to expect next. There was a confused hubbub, which was suddenly drowned by a whoosh, a noise like an escape of steam at high pressure. It was all over in a second, though the second was long enough for everyone to feel the icy lash of panic. There was the whoosh, and from the trees at the near end of the crescent something that whished and flared came straight at the group between the chalets. It seemed to be coming straight at them, but before anyone had time to duck it had passed just over their heads and was gone flaring into the night.

A hand seized Sally's wrist and dragged her into cover. Women screamed again. They were all trying to get behind the chalets.

"A rocket!" exclaimed Paul, his hand still round Sally's wrist. "The bloody swine! Did you hear that first bang? It was right underneath my chalet. I——"

"Get indoors, turn on the lights and open the curtains!" shouted Nigel, who had arrived on the scene. "Where did that rocket come from?"

"Those trees," said Paul, emerging from cover. "I'll go and find out——"

"No, stay where you are, both of you," Nigel ordered.

The crescent was blazing with lights as he ran towards the trees. The Mad Hatter would surely not attempt any more fireworks. Amongst the trees, there was nothing but shadows—shadows, and on the edge of the trees, stuck into the grass, a small

fork of wood on which the forepart of the rocket stick must have rested. It had evidently been aimed deliberately so as to pass the left-hand edge of the nearest hut, shoot just over the heads of those who would be brought out into the crescent by the sound of the first explosion, and clear the top of the chalets beyond them on the right.

By the time the staff-attendant arrived, Nigel had pocketed the wooden fork. The attendant had been at the far end of the crescent and seen nothing but the rocket. Indeed the flare had been so blindingly close that no one could have seen anything for a few moments after. But the Mad Hatter had not relied upon this to aid his escape. For Nigel, carefully scrutinising the grass around the spot, found there the remains of a burnt-out fuse.

He left the staff-attendant to guard the place, and returned to the crescent.

"Something went off underneath my chalet," Paul told him. "I think it must have been one of those firework bombs. They make the hell of a noise. I thought it was the I.R.A. at first."

Nigel flashed his torch under the chalet. Yes, a charred cardboard container. This, too, he could see, had been set off by a fuse.

"*Now* what's been happening?" came the exasperated voice of Captain Wise. His thin hair was rumpled, he wore a silk dressing-gown, and his artificial teeth had not been replaced for the occasion. Nigel began to tell him; but it was difficult in the group of residents that had come milling around them. He took the manager into Paul's chalet and firmly closed the door. Sitting on the bed, Nigel gave a brief account.

"Presumably he lit the fuse of the firework bomb first, then stuck the rocket in position and lit its fuse, and he could have had time to go home and solve the *Times* crossword if he'd wanted—the fuses were long enough."

"It lets me out, anyway." Paul Perry's voice was still a little shaky. Neither Nigel nor Captain Wise made any comment. "Well, damn it, I wouldn't have set off a bomb under my own chalet, would I?"

"Besides, you must have heard something when the chap put it there," suggested Captain Wise, kindly.

Shock, doubt, anguish, passed over Paul's face—clear enough for anyone to read. Half to himself, he muttered:

"That's funny. I don't remember hearing anything. Oh God! Surely I'd never do a thing like that! Not that rocket. Sally was there." Suddenly he turned upon them both. "Get out! Get out of here! I'm sick of being badgered!"

"Pull yourself together, my dear chap," said Captain Wise. "No one's accusing you of anything. The chap may have done it so quietly you didn't hear."

He and Nigel left the chalet. As they were walking away, Captain Wise said:

"Nothing in that, is there? I mean, as he said, he wouldn't have put the bomb under his own chalet—not if he was the practical joker."

"Not *unless* he was the practical joker, you mean. It'd be the obvious way of clearing himself of suspicion, wouldn't it—to stage one of the jokes on himself?"

"Oh, that's a bit too subtle for me," said the manager, laughing.

XV

THE NEXT DAY, though for the great mass of the Wonderland residents it provided nothing more dramatic than the weekly sports gymkhana, was unbelievably melodramatic for two of them. Not only melodramatic, one might say, but decisive. for they would never be quite the same again. To a superficial observer their actions, in relation to the characters who performed them, might have seemed a running contrary to form—almost a flat contradiction of all we know about the characters. Luckily Nigel Strangeways was not a superficial observer, and was able to see how these actions, apparently so impromptu and paradoxical, proceeded logically from deep-lying sources. Had he not perceived this, the Mad Hatter case would have become intolerably complicated, and perhaps defied all solution. It was, in essence, as he had vaguely suspected all along, a simple enough case, its difficulties being on the whole accidental to the main plot.

This morning, as yesterday, the *Daily Post* lived up to its reputation for making the best of the newspaper silly season. FURTHER OUTRAGES AT WONDERLAND, it announced to its enraptured readers. DEAD RABBIT IN 'TEC'S BED. And in considerably smaller type, HOLIDAY BELLE POISONED? Whatever consolation Phyllis Arnold may have derived from this headline, Captain Wise plainly believed that the whole thing was a final, knock-out blow for Wonderland.

"Where's the leakage, though?" he kept on plaintively asking Nigel. "How did they find out this time?"

"Presumably the Mad Hatter rings them up with a daily bulletin."

"We ought to have had the telephone boxes watched," said the manager irritably, by "we" clearly meaning "you."

"It'd have been no use. We couldn't possibly ring up the exchange every time one of your visitors makes a call, and ask them what he's been talking about. We haven't got police powers."

"Arbuthnot—that's our managing director—is coming down this morning. I'd like to have something concrete to show him."

"Concrete? How d'you mean?"

Really, thought Captain Wise, this alleged detective is being remarkably obtuse and unhelpful to-day.

"Something about the Mad Hatter, of course."

"You'd like me to produce the Mad Hatter at the conference?"

"Well, naturally," replied the manager, looking a bit startled. "But I quite realise you've had very little time. We can't expect results so soon, and——"

"Oh, I'll bring him out of the bag, if you like."

"You know who he is? Since when?" Captain Wise was in a state of keen excitement.

"I've *known* for some time. I can't prove it yet, though."

"It wouldn't be much good, then. Arbuthnot's a man who'll want hard facts."

"He's that sort of man, is he? And if he doesn't get them, I suppose I'm fired?"

"No. Not necessarily. It was on my responsibility that you were called in, and I shall be footing the bill myself." Captain Wise gave a short, apologetic laugh. "No, But the fact is that this publicity, in my judgment, has done for the Wonderland camps, so it doesn't much matter now whether we discover the culprit or not. To put

it bluntly, I can't afford to pay you much longer for doing work that has ceased to be of more than academic importance."

"I see that. Though I shouldn't say that the protection of your guests is an entirely academic matter. After all, the chap may start shooting off something more lethal than rockets at them soon——"

"There'll be damned few guests to shoot at next week." Captain Wise indicated a pile of letters on his desk. "That's just one post. People cancelling their bookings. Yes, they're preferring to sacrifice their deposits rather than come to this plague spot."

"As bad as that? Yes, quick results do seem to be called for. I must jump to it." At the door Nigel turned and said, "By the way, can you vouch absolutely for Miss Jones?"

"Vouch——? What an extraordinary suggestion! You don't seriously——"

"Her father was ruined and driven to suicide by financial competitors. If any of those men were behind Wonderland, it would supply the motive."

"But the idea is fantastic. She's entirely trustworthy, devoted to this place—why, I don't mind admitting, she's done more than anyone for it. You say you know who the culprit it; but if you've fastened on her, you've made a complete blunder."

Nigel retired. In spite of Captain Wise's protestations, Nigel believed he had seen a faint glimmer of doubt, of hesitation in his eyes. Going to one of the telephone boxes downstairs, he rang up Sir John Strangeways at New Scotland Yard. Sir John's information was largely negative. He had had discreet inquiries made into the Wonderland company, and could assure Nigel that none of the financiers who had ruined Lysaght Jones were behind it. He had no information to the discredit of Teddy Wise, beyond a certain episode relating to a policeman's helmet knocked off after a Varsity match. Mortimer Wise, declared Sir John, had run very quickly through a large legacy received a few years ago: this, Nigel imagined, was the period when he had become acquainted with Miss Jones: after that, Mortimer had descended to the secretaryship of a golf club; his copy-book appeared to be unblotted.

"And what about that snapshot I sent you?"

"No luck yet. Give me time, boy. I've only had a few hours."

"Try——" Nigel mentioned the name of a secret department which invigilates over the activities of foreign agents. "I fancy they may have seen that phiz before."

He rang off, leaving his uncle fuming at the other end of the wire. His next move was to go in search of Sally Thistlethwaite. He found her practising with Mr. Morley for the three-legged race that would take place in the afternoon. Detaching the girl from her partner, he took her off to a quiet seat near the edge of the cliffs. Behind them, to their left, was the white, functional Wonderland building, the windows behind the "Captain's bridge" open to the mild southerly airs. From the fun-fair, which was behind them on their right, came the cries of children at play. Nobody appeared to be using the miniature rifle range; but from somewhere inland, where a territorial camp was situated, there could be heard the spasmodic rattle of machine-gun practice. These sounds punctuated the rhythmically beating ground-bass made by the sea as it played upon the shingle far below. Nigel began to question Sally about her own experiences at the camp. She was evidently on the defensive against him when the names of Paul Perry or Albert Morley were mentioned, though she was frank enough about everyone else: this first became apparent when he talked about the duckings; she insisted that neither of them had been near her when she was pulled under water, but her insistence did not ring true to his ear.

Nigel, however, had a way with unwilling witnesses, and before long she was

confiding in him her fears for Paul Perry.

"I'm certain he didn't do these things, but he makes it so difficult for me. He seems to be avoiding me. I wanted him to be my partner in the sports, and he just said he was going for a long walk to-day. It's funny," she added with pleasant ingenuousness, "because I'm sure he's attracted to me."

She then told him how Paul had refused to handle the fish she caught. "That proves it, doesn't it?" she said. "If he hated touching the fish, he'd never have carried those beastly stinking animals about."

"No. Unless he didn't know he was doing it. Has he talked to you about split personality at all?"

"We were talking about it—when was it?—on Sunday, I think—by the tennis-courts. But——"

"I think one reason why he's behaving oddly, avoiding you and so on, is that he's afraid that's what's wrong with him."

"Do *you* think it's true?" Sally asked directly.

"I can't say absolutely for certain yet."

"If it was, and he is the Mad Hatter, they couldn't do anything to him, could they?" Her eyes were veiled now by her dark lashes.

"They wouldn't put him in prison, no."

Sally opened her eyes wide at him: the effect was dazzling, like sunshine after rain. She said, blinding at the words:

"Would a person like that have dotty children, if they had children?"

"Probably not. But we're looking a bit too far ahead, my dear, aren't we? Let's go back to the case."

Sally answered his questions more freely now. Little by little, he drew from her all she had seen and heard during the last five days. While they talked, one of the staff came and herded the children away from the fun-fair: the children's sports started at eleven-thirty and were to be over by lunch-time. Shortly after eleven-thirty a messenger arrived asking for Nigel's attendance in the manager's office. The great Mr. Arbuthnot was come, in clouds of wrath, to deliver judgment.

Mr. Arbuthnot had small, shrewd, choleric eyes, a rather ferocious set of the mouth, and a neck that overlapped his collar at the back. He looked what he was, the successful business man: he was behaving now like a spoilt child whose world has suddenly turned him over and given him a spanking.

"——the whole thing's been outrageously mismanaged from the start," he was saying as Nigel entered. "The company holds you responsible, Wise, and—who the devil's this?"

"Mr. Strangeways. This is our managing director, Mr. Arbuthnot."

Mr. Arbuthnot gave Nigel a curt nod and one of those cold, searching gazes with which his kind like to feel they are at once summing up the character of the recipient and putting him in his place. Sitting behind his desk, Captain Wise fiddled sheepishly with papers: Teddy Wise, standing by the far wall, had the glazed look of a punch-drunk pugilist—he had evidently had a gruelling at the hands of Mr. Arbuthnot. Only Esmeralda Jones seemed unconcerned: her cool, demure efficiency was almost a parody of itself: Nigel could have sworn that her left eyelid drooped at him behind the horn-rimmed glasses, as the managing director began stamping up and down the room again.

"The police should have been called in at once, Wise, since you were incapable of controlling the situation yourself. There's no use having amateurs fiddling about with this kind of thing."

“As I told you, Mr. Arbuthnot, the police would have meant publicity and great inconvenience for our visitors,” Captain Wise repeated wearily.

“Damn it, man, you’ve the publicity and the inconvenience anyway. *And* made a fool of the company into the bargain.”

“If I’m not wanted,” Nigel interposed politely, “I’ll go. I’ve got plenty to do.”

Mr. Arbuthnot halted abruptly and stared at Nigel as if he hadn’t noticed him till this moment.

“You’ll go when I tell you, young man. You’re in the company’s employment now, and don’t you forget it.”

“On the contrary, I understood I was being paid by Captain Wise.”

“Well, well, don’t quibble. You’re supposed to be here in the company’s interests, though what you’ve done to justify——”

“I’m here to discover the identity of a practical joker, Mr. Arbuthnot, and not to whitewash the Wonderland company.”

The director’s bull-like neck went purple and seemed to swell.

“Whitewash? Who said anything about whitewash?” he exclaimed.

“I just wanted to make my position quite clear,” Nigel answered mildly.

“Oh, you did, did you? Well, perhaps you’ll now go on to make it quite clear what you’ve done to justify that position. And I want facts, see?—no fancy theorising.”

That suited Nigel, too, who felt no strong desire to place any theories before Mr. Arbuthnot in his present mood.

“Very well. Here are the facts up to date——”

“Wait a minute. It’s damned hot in here. You—what’s your name?—Miss Jones—can’t you open a window or something?”

“The windows are all open, Mr. Arbuthnot,” she replied sweetly. “Perhaps you would prefer to continue the conference on the balcony?”

Grumbling, the director assented. Chairs were brought outside, and Nigel gave a résumé of the outrages and his own investigations. When he had finished, Mr. Arbuthnot gave an impatient snort.

“Yes, yes,” he exclaimed testily, “we know all that. What do you make of it? Have you got anywhere? That’s what I’m interested in. You’re paid to get results, aren’t you?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Captain Wise stood up and moved over to the rail at the right-hand end of the balcony.

“The case is by no means a simple one,” Nigel began. Before he had got very far, Mr. Arbuthnot interrupted:

“Poppycock! Don’t start making a mountain out of a molehill—I’m not impressed. Anyone with their wits about them ought to be able to put a finger on this chap at once. Some hooligan starts practical joking, and you all behave as though he was a master criminal. Good God, you’re not acting in an Edgar Wallace——”

Mr. Arbuthnot’s tirade was cut short, for the second time within a few minutes. Accustomed to being heard out in respectful silence, the director was stung to fury by this treatment. He glared at Captain Wise, who had interrupted him by clapping his hand to his ear. He shouted:

“What the devil——?”

But Nigel was already on his feet, peering incredulously at Captain Wise, who said:

“Something must have stung me. A hornet, I should think.” He took his hand away from his ear. It was covered with blood. And blood was streaming from a neat notch, like a hole clipped by a bus-conductor’s punch, that had been made high up

on the edge of his ear.

"That's not a sting. You've been shot at."

"Rubbish," said Mr. Arbuthnot, his eyes popping. "People don't——"

"Shut up!" said Nigel over his shoulder: he was now leaning over the end of the balcony. "I thought I heard a shot, only you were bawling so loud. Yes, somebody shot at Wise from the miniature range down there. A .22 presumably. Teddy, come over here and keep your eye on the range. Miss Jones, get some cotton wool and plug that wound: then fetch the doctor." He raced through the office and down the stairs.

"An inch or two to the right, and that bullet'd have gone into the back of my head," Captain Wise was saying dazedly.

"There's your first introduction to the Mad Hatter, Mr. Arbuthnot," said Miss Jones.

But Mr. Arbuthnot had retired precipitately into the office, and was steadying himself with the contents of a pocket flask.

Watching from the balcony, Teddy Wise saw Nigel run towards the fun-fair and enter the miniature range. Nobody had emerged from it in the interval, and there was clearly nobody hiding there now. So much Teddy could see: what he could not see was the expression of bewilderment on Nigel's face. The shot which had clipped Captain Wise's ear and so intimidated Mr. Arbuthnot, had neatly upset all his own calculations, too. Calling to Teddy to stay where he was, he went round to the back of the miniature range and hurried towards a clump of trees some hundred yards beyond that was the only cover for anyone who might have fled in this direction. As he did so, a figure walked out towards him from the trees, and resolved itself into the form of Albert Morley.

"Hallo," he said; "anything up? I heard shouting."

"Captain Wise has been shot. Did you see anyone come this way?"

"Shot?" Albert Morley looked as if he was going to be sick. "But it's—he's not dead?"

"No. He escaped that by a couple of inches."

"Oh, thank God! thank God! What a terrible thing to happen!"

"You didn't see anyone?"

"No. I was just going for a little walk, and I heard people shouting, and——"

"Did you hear the shot?"

"Well, I suppose I must have. But one often hears shots from the range. You say Captain Wise was hit?"

"Yes. In the ear. You'd better come with me."

"Of course. If I can be of any help——"

Nigel examined the clump of trees, but no one was hiding there. They then went back to the fun-fair and searched the swing boats and everything else which could afford a hiding-place. Presently Nigel called Teddy Wise down from the balcony. Teddy was instructed to find the attendant who looked after the shooting-gallery, and to mobilise the whole staff for the purpose of finding out where each of the visitors had been at the time of the shooting.

When the attendant arrived, Nigel pointed out a rifle which was lying on the counter of the range.

"I want that taken away and put in a safe place. Wrap a handkerchief round the stock. There may be fingerprints. It has an empty cartridge-case in the breach, and must be the rifle that was used."

In a few minutes the man returned. Nigel learnt that he had been helping with

the children's sports: it was quite usual to leave the shooting-gallery unattended—visitors put money in a slot if they wished to use the moving target, while shooting at the ordinary targets was free.

"D'you mean, anyone can stroll in and pick up a rifle and blaze away? Isn't that a bit dangerous? One of the children here might walk off with a rifle."

"Oh, they're not allowed in without an adult." The man looked distinctly uncomfortable, and Nigel soon forced him into the admission that it was *not* usual to leave the gallery unattended: he had, in fact, forgotten to lock it up just now when he went over to the children's sports. This was shortly after eleven o'clock.

Nigel then enlisted his aid in making a thorough search of the gallery. The recent marksman must have departed in such a hurry that he might possibly have left some clue behind. If he had, they could not find it. What they did find, however, made the problem more baffling than ever. The attendant discovered that one of the rifles was missing.

"They were all in the racks this morning. I'll swear to that," he said.

"You mean, when you opened the place up, or when you left?"

The man looked still more uneasy. He admitted at last that he had not counted the rifles when he left the gallery at eleven o'clock: it was empty, then, and he had never thought of making an inspection. He held to it, though, that no rifle had been missing when he opened the gallery at ten o'clock.

If this was true, Nigel reasoned, it must either have been taken between eleven o'clock and the time when the shot was fired, eleven-fifty, during the period when the gallery was unattended and empty; or else it had been removed by one of the people who had been using the range between ten and eleven: though it was difficult to see how anyone could have walked off with a rifle in full view of the attendant and other visitors. Then again, there was the question—why did the unknown marksman leave the rifle he had fired upon the counter and take away another one? It seemed absurd to suppose there could have been two individuals each of whom required the illicit use of a rifle on the same morning.

The attendant said that there were no fire-arms on the counter when he left the gallery to go to the sports: he had been in a hurry to get away, and had stacked the rifles in use that morning against the inside of the counter, instead of locking them up in the rack. Everything, Nigel reflected, had been made very easy for the criminal. He said:

"Could anyone have known that you had left the gallery unlocked this morning? You didn't mention it to anyone?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Strangeways. I didn't realise myself that I'd forgotten to lock up. I've only recently been put on to the gallery, and I'm afraid I've not got into the way of things yet."

"Who else has keys for it?"

"There's one in the office. And the games-organiser keeps one of his own. That's all."

Nigel finally asked the man if he knew the names of any of the visitors who had patronised the shooting-range that morning. It turned out that he knew several, of whom Paul Perry was one. Nigel then went up to the office, where he ascertained that one of the keys of the gallery was on its usual hook. The other key Teddy Wise produced from his pocket when Nigel approached him on the sports-ground. Unless someone was lying, this eliminated the possibility that the criminal had borrowed or stolen one of these keys in order to obtain a rifle, and had then found the gallery unlocked. Whoever had shot at Captain Wise had done it impromptu, tempted by the

open gallery. This was what Nigel had presupposed; for, although the manager used the "Captain's bridge" quite frequently, the criminal could not have relied upon his being there—and at the only point of the balcony where he would be a target for a shot from the gallery—at that particular hour of the day.

But the problem of the two rifles still remained. Nigel's brain was hammering away at it as he strolled round the sports-ground, watching Teddy Wise and his assistants take a roll-call. Other members of the staff were going the round of the chalets, the other buildings, the beach and the grounds. By lunch-time Teddy was able to give him a report. Apart from one large party which had gone off on a charabanc trip, all the residents could account satisfactorily for their whereabouts at the time the shot was fired—all the residents, with the exception of Paul Perry, Albert Morley and Miss Gardiner. The two latter had been alone at eleven-fifty, they said: Miss Gardiner writing letters in her chalet, Mr. Morley walking away from the sports-ground to the spot where Nigel had met him. Albert volunteered in addition that Paul Perry had gone for a long walk: Paul was certainly not to be found in the camp, nor did he return for lunch.

After lunch, Nigel sought out Sally Thistlethwaite. Paul had not told her where he was going for his walk: in fact, she said, he had snubbed her when she suggested coming with him. No, she did not know at what time he had started out. Her father, however, reported having seen Perry walking down the drive at about half-past ten, away from the camp. Nigel took Mr. Thistlethwaite aside—he did not wish Sally to realise the object of his questions—and told him about the shot that had been fired at Captain Wise.

"At least our young friend cannot be held responsible for this culminating outrage," opined Mr. Thistlethwaite. "There is no question but that he was setting out for his walk when I saw him."

"What proof have you of that? He might have made a short detour and returned via that clump of trees above the shooting-gallery."

"One does not don a gaberdine, sir," retorted Mr. Thistlethwaite, slightly nettled, "in order to make short detours."

"A gaberdine?"

"He was wearing a loose, grey raincoat."

"Oh dear," said Nigel. "A raincoat for a long walk on a hot day like this? If he'd been carrying it—but wearing it: don't you see?—if it was the kind of coat that has slits beside the pockets, he could have been holding the rifle hidden beneath it, in a vertical position. I don't at all like the sound of this."

He liked it still less when he had interviewed the shooting-range attendant again. The man said he had observed that Perry was wearing a loose raincoat when he entered the gallery soon after ten o'clock: he had not noticed him leave. The evidence certainly suggested that it was Perry who had taken the missing rifle. But Nigel was still faced with the difficulty that the shooting of Captain Wise could not have been planned beforehand. The only possible theory which could at present account for the facts was that Perry had worked in collaboration with the actual marksman: he had taken the rifle for himself or his accomplice to use whenever occasion offered; but the accomplice, happening to be in the gallery when Captain Wise appeared on the balcony, had taken pot-luck with a rifle that was handy. And that theory is a nice tissue of coincidences and begged questions, thought Nigel disgustedly.

Until Paul Perry returned to the camp—always supposing that he did return, there was little that Nigel could do. He told the shooting-gallery attendant to remain

at his post and watch out for any of the people who had used the range in the morning: the person who had taken the rifle might try to replace it unobserved. He then tested the other rifle for fingerprints: as he rather expected, it was so covered with them as to render it almost useless for purposes of identification.

Nigel's next move was somewhat in the nature of a forlorn hope. He rang up the *Applestock Gazette*, and asked for the senior reporter. Mr. Leeson admitted that the information about the new Wonderland outrages, which had appeared in the *Daily Post* this morning, was communicated to him over the phone yesterday. As far as he could tell, it had been the same voice speaking.

"Will you do me a favour?" asked Nigel. "If this Mad Hatter rings you up again with another story, I want you to hold him in play, and call me on another of your lines. Wonderland has two or three lines, so you'll be able to get through all right. When you've called me, keep the Mad Hatter talking as long as possible."

Mr. Leeson agreed to do this. Nigel then went to the office, where he found Captain Wise in bandages but a more cheerful frame of mind, and told him about the trap he had laid to catch the Mad Hatter.

"I'd rather you kept this quite confidential. Don't tell even your brother or Miss Jones. I shall be about the place. If a call comes through for me from the *Applestock Gazette*, I shall go at once to one of the telephone-boxes downstairs. Whoever is in the other will be the Mad Hatter. Of course, we can't bank much on this—the chap'll be very foolish if he doesn't suspect that some such trap might be laid for him.

"What's to stop him ringing up the *Gazette* from the nearest village or an A.A. box?

"Nothing. But, if we hear he's ringing them up, and there's no one in the public boxes here, we'll know it's one of the people who's not in the camp grounds. Almost everyone'll be at the gymkhana this afternoon, won't they?"

Almost everyone was. Captain Wise, his bandaged head stimulating a wonderful variety of rumours amongst the residents, who had not yet been told about the shooting, sat in a deck-chair on the edge of the sports-ground, Miss Jones beside him. Teddy Wise was very much to the fore, organising each of the events, jollying the competitors along, and giving a humorous commentary through his megaphone. The sports were the most popular item in the week's entertainment, and everyone seemed to be there. The charabanc party had returned. Only Paul Perry was still missing from the fold.

When the competitors for the three-legged race moved off to the start, Mr. Thistlethwaite drew Nigel away from the spectators. Indicating Mr. Morley, who was tying his leg to Sally's with a handkerchief, he said:

"You informed me, sir, that Mr. Morley was in the vicinity of the shooting-gallery this morning. Are you satisfied that the shot was intended for *Captain* Wise?"

"Hallo, hallo! What's your idea, Mr. Thistlethwaite?"

"Was Captain Wise facing towards the gallery when he was shot?"

"No, he had his back to it."

"The shape of his head is markedly similar to his brother's."

"I see. You suggest Albert Morley shot him by mistake for Teddy? Motive, presumably, being revenge for Teddy's having so often made a fool of him?"

"One can try even the most patient temper too far. The effort to repress a natural indignation may breed a hideous rancour," Mr. Thistlethwaite replied oracularly.

"You mean Albert Morley is the Mad Hatter?"

"I have suspected all along, sir, that these practical jokes were intended to culminate in a graver crime—a crime which might appear to be a practical joke of

unintentionally fatal issue."

"But you told me Morley had an alibi for the period when the dead animals were being put about."

"I genuinely believed it, sir. In fact, I rallied Mr. Morley on the subject, telling him that he and I, at least, were now above suspicion. Observing him just now, however, as he tied himself and my daughter with that handkerchief, I was reminded by the process of thought-association—with which you are doubtless familiar—of something that had entirely slipped my memory. A handkerchief. It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause. To be brief, some six or seven minutes before the interval in the cabaret performance, I found myself requiring a handkerchief. Mrs. Thistlethwaite always keeps a spare one for me in her reticule. She was sitting apart from me, close to the side-door by the stage, as she had just returned from assisting Sally with her costume and make-up. I moved to the front and sat down beside her, not wishing to return to my own seat since Sally's number was just about to begin. When her turn was over, I went back and found Mr. Morley sitting where I had left him. But there are six or seven minutes unaccounted for."

Mr. Thistlethwaite made a consequential gesture, as if offering Nigel the six or seven minutes on a silver tray.

"That's interesting," said Nigel after a pause. "There are two difficulties about your theory, though. First, if the shooting was the intended climax of a prepared series of outrages, how do you account for its being so impromptu? He couldn't have known beforehand that the shooting-gallery would be open and empty at the very moment when his enemy appeared on the balcony."

"Indeed no, sir. He may have planned some other method of attack on Mr. Edward Wise. Or he may just have been awaiting the inspiration of a favourable moment. In either case, it is not unreasonable to suppose that, happening to be by the shooting-gallery, finding the time, the place, and the hated one all together, so to say, he would avail himself of the gift fortune had thrown into his lap. You mentioned a second objection, sir?"

"Yes. And if you can get round that, Mr. Thistlethwaite, you'll qualify as the boa-constrictor king. What do you say to the fact that Albert Morley is——"

"Excuse me, sir. May I have a word with you?"

It was the shooting-gallery attendant. Breathlessly he announced that Paul Perry had just passed by the entrance of the gallery, glanced in, and finding it empty except for the attendant, had passed on towards the cliffs. He was still wearing the grey raincoat, the man said, and looked very pale.

Nigel hurried away from the sports-ground towards the cliff. When they came in sight of it, there was no sign of Paul Perry.

"Don't think he's chucked himself over?" asked the attendant, not without a noticeable quickening of interest.

Nigel lay down on the cliff edge and peered over to his right, where the landslip lay, beckoning his companion to do the same.

"Can you see him? My eyes are not too good."

"Just a minute … There! He's behind that big rhododendron bush, half-way down the path."

"Hey! Perry! Stop a minute!" Nigel shouted.

His companion could see Perry start, make as if to run down the path, slip and fall, then after a few moments stand up again and begin climbing back towards them.

When they met him, Nigel was shocked by his appearance. His face was leaden grey, as if he were in the last stages of exhaustion: his eyes showed the meek despair

of an animal which has been so long in the trap that it almost welcomes the hunter who brings it the *coup de grace*. Yet there was something in the carriage of his head, the stiffness of the body beneath the raincoat, that seemed indefinably to contradict all this.

"Where've you been all day?" Nigel asked. "Do you know that Captain Wise has been shot—with a Winchester rifle from the shooting-gallery?"

Paul Perry's reaction to this was odd enough. "Nonsense," he said, huskily but with a certain authority. "Not Captain Wise." Then his eyes seemed to realise the point of Nigel's questions, to turn gradually from incredulity back to despair again, and from despair to the glazed look of insentience; and, muttering, "Oh, this is too much," he swayed forward and pitched into Nigel's arms.

"Go and look further down the path. Near where you first saw him. The rifle may be there somewhere," Nigel commanded.

In a couple of minutes the attendant returned. "Here it is, sir! Found it pushed in underneath the rhododendron bush—he hadn't time to hide it properly—must've been going down to chuck it in the sea. It's the one, all right. Magazine emptied, too. Wonder what he used the other bullets for."

Silently Nigel beckoned the man close and pointed to the body, now limp, which had held itself together so stiffly under the raincoat.

"God's truth!" the attendant exclaimed. "Tried to do himself in."

Beneath the raincoat, Paul Perry's clothes were soaked in blood, all over his left shoulder, over his heart, and down his left side.

XVI

"WON'T YOU AT least tell us where you went for your walk?" Nigel was asking patiently four hours later. He sat on one side of Paul Perry's bed, Dr. Holford on the other: the doctor, who examined Perry's wound when they had carried him back to the camp, declared it was not dangerous; a bullet had passed through the upper part of the arm, and the patient had lost a good deal of blood, but he should soon recover. The doctor was present at this interview to ensure that his patient should not be too exhausted by it.

Paul Perry, though still white in the face, had clearly benefited by his short sleep, and of the two it was Nigel who looked the more exhausted. He repeated his question.

"Sorry. My lips are sealed, though," replied Paul with a trace of his old jauntiness.

"Very well. If you won't, you won't. I can only say that you make things look bad for yourself. You remove a rifle from the shooting-gallery, having previously taken care to inform two people at least that you were going for a long walk. An hour and a half later, Captain Wise is shot. At three o'clock, when you know that everyone will be at the sports, you sneak back, intending to replace the rifle. You find the attendant alone in the gallery, so you go on down the cliffs, meaning to chuck the rifle into the sea instead. Don't you realise—it'll take a lot of explaining away."

"Explain away, then. You're the detective, not me."

"How did you come by that wound?"

"The rifle went off by accident and my shoulder happened to be in the way."

"That's not true. The wound was made by a weapon of larger calibre—a heavy revolver, probably."

For the first time Paul Perry's passive resistance showed signs of cracking; the glitter in his eyes was dulled, but he remained silent. Nigel tried another angle of attack.

"Do you still assert that the Mad Hatter and Old Ishmael are one and the same person?"

Perry's mouth began to twitch and jerk: he made a convulsive movement, as if to raise himself in the bed, and fainted.

"Now, what on earth——?" murmured Nigel.

"That will have to be all for the present," Dr. Holford said, bending over his patient. The next moment he was startled by a loud exclamation from Nigel— "Oh, what a fool I am! Kick me three times round the camp!"

Nigel was out of the chalet, running towards the telephone-booths in the main building. There he rang up the Applestock police; but before he had got the number, he put down the receiver again, muttering, "No, it'll take all night to explain."

He pelted up the stairs and found Teddy Wise in his room, just about to go down to dinner.

"I want half a dozen men to come up at once to the hermit's wood. Can you manage?"

"What's this? Some new rudery taken place?"

"I'll explain as we go. You'll come, too?"

"O. K., boss."

"Have you a revolver?"

“Lummy, it’s like that, is it? Yes, I’ve my brother’s old gat tucked away somewhere.” Teddy rummaged in a drawer, produced a heavy service revolver and loaded it. Five minutes later, followed by six members of the staff armed with heavy sticks, they were on their way up to the wood.

When they had arrived there, Nigel distributed the six men round the edge of the wood.

“Stay where you are, unless you hear me shout. If anyone sees him come out of the wood, give a yell. Be careful how you tackle him: he’s armed. If he gets away, follow him at a distance. I don’t expect he’ll try to break through, though.”

“Why not?” asked Teddy, as he and Nigel cautiously entered the wood.

“Because Perry shot him. At least, he believes he shot him. That’s why he refused to tell me where he’d been.”

“But if Old Ishmael really is——”

“Quiet!” Nigel stopped and listened intently. In the windless, fading evening the wood was still as death. Richly lacquered by the last of the daylight, the leaves hung motionless. Shadows stretched and mutely pointed, as though each tree and bush were an accuser. A rabbit, scuttling suddenly out of a ride, startled them like an explosion.

“Now I know what the poor little pheasants feel like when a poacher’s around,” whispered Teddy. “We’re a sitting shot, if the old boy’s still capable of lifting a gun. Are you armed?”

“I have a pair of scissors,” said Nigel absently.

“Ah! Cold steel. The fellow’ll never stand up to that.”

Cautiously, keeping several yards apart, they moved through the wood. Brambles reached out and fastened on their clothes: branches whipped their faces. It was slow going. Teddy felt an almost irresistible impulse to shout aloud and go bursting through the tangle of undergrowth—anything to break the silence, the suspense.

At last they reached the edge of the clearing where the hermit’s shack stood. Its stove-pipe chimney cocked up drunkenly into the air: all the shadows of the wood seemed to have saturated its bulk: shadow welled from it like dark blood. Teddy covered the door with his revolver, while Nigel darted to the back and made his way round.

The shack was empty. But the bricks beneath the fireplace were scattered about, and the cavity below them was empty, too. Nigel knew now that his theory was correct. It only remained to find the recluse himself. He was convinced that Perry had shot the man, or at least believed he had shot him: but he couldn’t yet risk bringing in the six watchers to help search the wood, for the recluse might only be wounded and still able to evade them on ground he knew so well.

Summoning Teddy to his side, he began the search again. Presently, on the westward edge of the clearing, they found the bracken trodden down. A zigzag, intermittent trail led them, after many halts and false casts, in a rough circle round to the eastward end of the wood again. Twice they picked up ejected revolver shells, and in another spot the smaller case of a .22 bullet. The train they followed so painfully was crossed at times by another one, also freshly made.

“This all tells a pretty grim story, doesn’t it?” said Nigel.

“It’s just so much Red Indians to me. I haven’t the foggiest notion——”

Teddy was silenced by a loud cra-awk from nearby. A crow, startled by their approach, had flown up with a shattering clap of wings. Or was it they who had startled the bird? Might it not have been some faint movement from the fallen scarecrow beyond that tree, lying on the very spot from which the bird had risen, its

black arms outflung and crumpled like the wings of a shot crow?

"That's a funny place for a——"

"And scarecrows don't usually have grey beards. It's all right. You can put that gun away. He's dead."

They approached the body of the recluse. In the dead centre of the forehead there was a neat red hole, a little resembling the cast-mark of a Hindu princess. In other respects the corpse was less neat: the crow had founds its eyes.

Teddy turned away, feeling abominably sick. The nightmare, however, seemed to reach another climax when he heard Nigel say:

"This is where the scissors will come in useful."

"What are you doing?" asked Teddy, quite unable to turn round.

"Cutting off his beard."

Presently Teddy heard Nigel calling to him. "Come and look. Do you recognise the face?"

Queasily he approached. "Well, I suppose so. But I recognised it much more easily with the beard on."

"Who is it?"

"Why, Old Ishmael presumably. Who the devil else could it be?"

"Oh no it isn't—not the proto-Ishmael, anyway. Look again."

"Good God!" Teddy exclaimed after a long pause. "I remember now! That snapshot you showed us. It was hard to recognise at first without"—he gulped —"without the eyes."

"Yes. We have here the gentleman who called himself Charles Black. And here's his revolver. And somewhere about him, I fancy, we shall find some aerial photographs, some documents—whatever it was that he surprised Perry taking out from under those bricks. Yes, this looks like it. A waterproof folder. Well, they can wait."

"But, look here, where *is* Old Ishmael then? The real one?"

"Oh, I doubt if we'll ever find him. He's down among the dead men. Very deep down. Maybe in that bog. Hoy!" Nigel kept shouting at intervals to guide the six watchers towards them. When they had arrived, the body was carried to the shack. Two of them would stay on guard there till the police arrived.

On his return to the camp Nigel was told that a call had come through to him from London: he was to ring back Sir John Strangeways at once. He asked if there had been any other calls. No, they told him. Well, it was something that the Mad Hatter had not taken advantage of his absence to communicate with the *Applestock Gazette*; anyway, the *Gazette* and the *Daily Post* might soon have a story that would push the Mad Hatter right off the front page.

"Where the devil have you been, boy?" exclaimed the usually imperturbable Sir John, when Nigel rang him up.

"Just out for a walk, uncle."

"Well, you've no business to go out for walks when—that snapshot you sent me, we've identified it at last. It's a German agent our secret service had been watching for years. He disappeared about eighteen months ago. Our people couldn't find any trace of him, and it was assumed he must have slipped out of the country. Where did you get the snapshot? Have you seen the fellow lately?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I saw him in a wood just now. He was——"

"Where? Don't you realise this is serious, Nigel? We can't afford to let him slip again."

"You're quite sure the chap in the photo is this spy of yours?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Look here, you must——"

"I only asked because it'd look pretty silly if we'd killed the wrong man."

"Speak up, boy! You sound as if you were talking gibberish."

"I said, the spy has been killed. Shot. Right through the middle of the head, head, head."

"*SHOT?*" Sir John's voice nearly blistered the wire. "Who shot him? Did you?"

"No. A young man who's staying in the camp. He did it with a Winchester .22 rifle. All by his little self."

From the other end of the wire came the sounds of a strong man fighting down hysteria. At last Sir John said, pronouncing each word most distinctly:

"Will you please tell me what you are talking about."

Nigel told him … An hour later he was telling it, with a little editing, to the Thistlethwaites in their chalet. Mr. Thistlethwaite tapped judicially on his beautiful drill trousers: Mrs. Thistlethwaite knitted as placidly as if she were listening to a radio talk for housewives: but Sally, sprawled and fidgeting on the bed, was all lit up with excitement.

"Your theory about Old Ishmael and the mysterious 'Charles Black' was remarkably correct up to a certain point, Mr. Thistlethwaite," said Nigel. "Its weakness was the assumption that the hermit had consented to take on the job of collecting naval information in Applestock. Why should he be offered it? No one lives the life of a hermit nowadays unless he's a bit wrong in the head: and people must be very much right in the head if they are to make successful spies."

"How did you first come to identify this Charles Black with Old Ishmael, sir?"

"When I heard that Old Ishmael had not been seen for several weeks on end just this time last year."

"Oh yes, I remember, Teddy told me that," said Sally.

"It seemed odd that a person of such regular habits—you could set your calendar by him, the landlord of the Mariner's Compass told me—should have lapsed from them like that. And, when he reappeared, the landlord said, he began to turn up in Applestock more frequently than his former two visits a week. These facts fitted the theory that the spy, having found in the hermit an identity he could profitably assume, had struck up an acquaintance with him, learned the part—so to speak—from the living model, then killed the hermit (I wonder did he dispose of the body in that bog across which Sally confronted him?), and hidden—either in the wood or elsewhere—for several weeks till his beard grew and he was weathered to the complexion of the hermit. The snapshot showed him as an elderly man with grey hair. The hermit's heard was grizzled. So that would work out all right. Sally gave me a hint, too."

"Did I? I don't remember—why, I never thought he was anyone but the real hermit."

"No. But you told me you felt there was 'something artificial' about him. It was a delicate intuition on your part. That croaky, unused sort of voice you mentioned, too. That deliberate way of speaking. It answered just as well to a man who wished to disguise his voice, to speak *like* Old Ishmael, as to the voice of a real recluse."

There was a pause, broken at last by Mr. Thistlethwaite saying, "What I don't understand is how our young friend came into it. You hadn't informed him of the real identity of the hermit."

"No. I wish I had. It would have saved him a few pretty grim hours. And yet—— Of course, I had no proof myself then."

"What do you mean, 'and yet,'" Sally said. She lay tense on the bed, chin cupped

in hands, her grey eyes blazing at Nigel.

"Now don't you glare at me like that," he replied good-humouredly. "You sent him into that wood yourself."

"*I* sent him? I'd no idea where he was going."

"Nevertheless, you sent him. He'd shown up to you twice in rather a bad light. Once, when you and he met the hermit in the wood and his nerve cracked; and again over that little altercation with Teddy Wise outside my chalet. He believed that you thought him a coward. That's why he's been so moody and difficult lately—one reason, at any rate. He wanted to reinstate himself with you and prove to his own satisfaction that he was not a coward. It sounds wildly romantic and four-featherish for a person like Perry: but even the sternest anti-romantic will jump in at the deep end if he gets a hard enough push."

"We are all heroes at heart," elaborated Mr. Thistlethwaite. "But to few of us is given, in this modern world, the opportunity of translating our dream into reality. The humdrum city clerk——"

"Daddy, do be quiet. I want to hear about Paul."

"Well," said Nigel, "the opportunity came to him when he heard your father and myself talking about Old Ishmael. I happened to say that we had no proof the hermit was a spy unless we found, amongst those aerial photographs, pictures of the Applestock naval harbour. So he decided to go and see if they were still there, under the fireplace on the floor of the shack. He took a rifle—that being the only firearm he could get hold of—because he was still genuinely scared stiff of the hermit and suspected, only too rightly, that he might be a dangerous customer. He went up to the wood, broke into the shack and unearthed the waterproof folder. He had not time to open it—this is important—because he heard footsteps approaching. Once again, though it was for the last time, his nerve cracked. He could think of nothing but escape. He threw down the folder in a panic, hid the rifle under his coat again, walked out of the shack. The recluse was standing on the edge of the clearing, still and stiff as a scarecrow, watching him. Just watching him.

"That was really his worst moment, he told me. He was thoroughly frightened, and at the same time boiling with humiliation—to be scared of an old, ragged man with a beard. He couldn't think of anything to say except, 'I thought it was going to rain. I went in to shelter. I hope you don't mind.' Which, considering there was a cloudless blue sky above, didn't begin to sound sensible. The next moment the hermit was across the clearing and inside his shack—that ungainly, flapping, yet horribly effective sort of movement——"

"Don't!" cried Sally. "I saw it at once."

"Anyway, Paul thought this the moment to beat a retreat. He ran off into the bracken. A bullet thudded into a tree beside his head. The spy had seen his waterproof folder lying on the floor, and realised that his visitor must not be allowed to get away. That shot, however, made a new man of Perry. From that moment, he says, though he was still frightened, he had a firm grip on himself. Something primitive shot up to the surface and possessed him: he was not going to stand for any old greybeard chivvying him with a revolver. He got behind the tree, took out his rifle, and fired.

"That was the beginning of a savage, grotesque sort of duel. There, in the sunlit wood, which seemed to afford so little cover for himself, so damnably much for his enemy, they started to shoot it out between them."

"But why didn't someone hear the shots?" asked Mrs. Thistlethwaite.

"Plenty of people did. But they were practising at the territorial camp all to-day,

and anyone would assume the sounds came from there—unless he happened to be very near the wood.

"Perry's first shot had sent the hermit behind his shack. He imagined he was still there, taking cover, till he heard the crack of a twig away to his left. He just managed in time to put the tree between himself and the attacker, whose second bullet hit the air where he'd been standing a second before. He fired back in the direction of the sound, and for an intolerable space of time there was absolute silence in the wood. It gave Perry leisure to realise three things: that the recluse had got between him and the camp; that the recluse knew every yard of the wood, whereas he himself had only been in it once before; and, worst of all, that his magazine might be empty.

"You see, when he lifted the rifle out of the shooting-gallery, he had not time to see whether the magazine was loaded—it was lying on the counter and someone might have already been firing it. It didn't really occur to him as at all likely that he might have to use it at all. But there he was now, with a very thin tree between him and a killer, knowing—in two senses of the word—that the next shot might be his last. Even if he had understood how to remove the magazine, so as to find out the number of bullets left in it, he obviously couldn't afford to do so at this stage of the proceedings.

"During his brief respite—if we can call it that—he decided that the attacker would be expecting him to retreat out of the wood in the direction he had already taken. He determined therefore to try and make a detour round to the eastward, which I would bring him out on the road leading back to the camp. He found a large bit of dead wood, chucked it westward as far as he could, and as soon as he heard the hermit moving stealthily after it, began his detour.

"At first, marking each successive piece of cover with his eye, he made for it as fast as he could go. But the noise brought the attacker back after a little, and now Perry moved quite literally one foot at a time. He didn't have to worry much about whether his magazine was empty, since he didn't catch a glimpse of the other chap for about ten minutes: the spy was evidently an expert in the use of cover.

"This went on for some time, with Perry always on the retreat and getting gradually nearer the edge of the wood. He was not far from it when he suddenly heard a noise and saw the muzzle of a revolver thrusting through a bramble bush some fifty yards away, on the edge of a ride he had just crossed. He instinctively flinched aside. It saved his life. The bullet hit his arm just below the shoulder instead of the heart. He fell and lay still. Luckily, falling sideways, he got himself under cover. He managed to prop the rifle barrel silently up on the lowest branch of a bush —his left arm was useless—and hold it there. This meant, of course, that he couldn't turn round. If the attacker chose to approach him from behind, it was the finish.

"Luckily, after waiting for what seemed to Perry about an hour, the spy decided he must be dead. The war of nerves was over. The spy cautiously peered round the bush behind which he was kneeling. Perry took a long look through the peep-sight. He remembers feeling absurdly petulant because there was a spider's web hanging right in his line of fire—it nearly made him burst into tears, he told me. Then his enemy moved a little, and the spider's web wasn't in the way any longer, and he took careful aim and fired.

"It was a perfect shot, as you know. Perry, however, what with loss of blood and general nervous strain, immediately, fainted. When he came to, it was half an hour later: he spent more time trying to remember exactly what had happened. It seemed very important to him to get the recent events in their correct sequence. The blood from his wound had clotted: he tied it up after a fashion and went to inspect his late

opponent. The man was unquestionably dead. Perry himself was by now a little delirious, and that accounts for his subsequent actions."

"But why did he try and hide the rifle? Surely it doesn't explain that? He hadn't done anything wrong—I mean, the chap had shot at him first, and he was a spy," said Sally.

"Ah, that's just it, he didn't know—not for certain—that the man was a spy. He hadn't had time to examine the photographs in the shack, you remember. When you're in the semi-delirious state he was in, it's difficult to think of more than one thing at a time. Some idea or image enters your mind and squats there, puffing itself out like a giant toad, so that nothing else can come into the picture at all. That's how it was with Paul Perry. I have killed a man: I am a murderer: I could never prove it was in self-defence (yes, the wound in his own arm was proof enough, but for the moment he'd forgotten it): I must put back the rifle where I got it, so that nothing can be traced: camp sports start at 2. 30, the coast will be clear then. That's the sort of way his mind worked.

"A hardened campaigner, of course, wound or no wound, would have kept enough reserve of sense and stamina to go at once to the shack and pick up the waterproof folder. But this was Perry's baptism of fire—and a pretty total immersion, too. He just kept repeating over to himself, I've shot a man, they'll call me a murderer. There had been other suspicions hanging over his head as well, he remembered vaguely. The Mad Hatter. The one thing he wanted was to get out of that damnable wood. We mustn't criticise him too severely."

"I should jolly well hope not," Sally cried indignantly. "I think he's marvellous. And, what's more, I'm going to tell him so."

"Not to-night, I shouldn't, dear. I expect the poor young man needs a good sleep," said her mother.

"When did you first—ah—tumble to the significance of his enigmatic conduct?" Mr. Thistlethwaite inquired.

"There was a queer look, behind the fear and exhaustion that showed on the surface—a look of confidence, exhilaration, I can't quite put a name to it. The fact was, he'd made good, and the consciousness of it kept breaking through his nightmare. Then I asked him a question about the Mad Hatter and Old Ishmael, and he fainted right off. It came to me in a flash: he looked guilty, yet somehow set up—a new man; he had tried to hide the rifle; he had heard us talking about espionage in connection with the hermit; he fainted as soon as Old Ishmael's name was mentioned. Everything linked up into coherent theory. So I rushed off to the wood with a posse."

There was a long silence. Finally Sally jumped up from the bed, an extraordinary light in her eyes. There was a kind of expectant, radiant certainty about her, as in the air when the four quarters have chimed and the great bell is on the point of striking the hour.

"But, don't you see?" she cried, "what a fool I am not to have thought of it before! This proves Paul's not the Mad Hatter. Daddy told me Captain Wise had been shot at this morning. Well, Paul was up in that wood. He couldn't have fired that shot."

"No, he couldn't have fired that shot," said Nigel slowly. There was no point, after all, in dashing her hopes so soon. Besides, she was probably right. Theoretically, of course, Paul Perry might have shot Captain Wise and then gone up to establish an alibi in the hermit's wood: but the notion of a criminal shooting one man in order to obtain an alibi for the attempted murder of another, though a pleasant enough conceit, could not be seriously entertained. Theoretically, again, there was no proof

that the shooting of Captain Wise had been the Mad Hatter's work; it had an impromptu appearance quite different from the previous outrages: therefore Paul Perry might still be considered leading candidate for the rôle of the Mad Hatter. But here again logic got one nowhere.

Back in his chalet, Nigel examined inch by inch the case he had constructed against the Mad Hatter. Everything fitted in neatly except the shot that had been fired at Captain Wise. He was still dispiritedly trying to solve that mystery a quarter of an hour later when Mr. Thistlethwaite entered. He had noticed Nigel's evasion of the issue when Sally had said that Paul could no longer be suspected of the practical jokes. They talked about this for a little. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite said:

"When you were called away from the sports, sir, you were just about to tell me why Mr. Morley could not have been the author of the outrage against Captain Wise."

"The answer is, he's the world's worst shot. Didn't you hear about the little episode between him and Teddy Wise in the shooting-gallery?"

"No."

Nigel related it. "If he couldn't hit those targets at a range of twenty yards, he certainly couldn't have pipped Captain Wise at a hundred and fifty."

"It might have been a lucky shot."

"But if he really wanted to kill Captain Wise—or Teddy, assuming that he mistook the one for the other—he'd never have adopted a method so risky to himself, knowing that he was such a rotten marksman. It'd never occur to him to try it."

"Perhaps he's really a good shot, and has been concealing the fact with a view to this crime."

"If that was so, and all the practical jokes were just leading up to the shooting of Wise, the crime was premeditated. And if the crime was premeditated, Morley wouldn't have been relying on the attendant forgetting to lock up the gallery this morning, and Wise appearing on the balcony. Nor would he have walked towards me out of that clump of trees, thus establishing himself as the only person near enough the place to have fired the shot, when he could easily have got right away by then."

"His behaviour was certainly paradoxical to a degree."

"You've said it. He's the spanner in the whole works. I've a strong feeling that it must have been he who fired the shot, and yet all logic is against it. Look here, Mr. Thistlethwaite, are you in a hurry for your beddy-byes? I'd like to outline the case to you, and see if a fresh mind can draw different conclusions from my own."

Mr. Thistlethwaite expressed himself agreeable to this. Nigel lit a cigarette and ran through the case, giving his companion a detailed outline but hinting at no theories.

When he had finished, Mr. Thistlethwaite kept silent for some time. Finally, studying the signet ring on his left hand, he said:

"This indeed puts a new complexion on the matter. I am compelled radically to revise my own ideas. On the strength of the facts stated by you, sir, I find myself looking in quite a different direction for the culprit. I find my eye focused upon Captain Wise and his charming secretary."

Mr. Thistlethwaite contrived to focus his eye upon these two individuals and at the same time give Nigel a shrewd glance. Nigel's expression, however, remained interested and non-committal.

"On what grounds?" he asked.

"First and foremost, my dear sir, opportunity——" Mr. Thistlethwaite mouthed the word as if it were a juicy plum. "They knew the field of operations intimately:

they knew the dispositions of their own sentries, and thus could easily avoid them whenever it was time for the Mad Hatter to prowl again. Let us enumerate the manifestations in due order."

Nigel lit another cigarette and, leaning his head back on his chair, blew smoke up at the ceiling.

"First, the voice over the loud-speakers at the dance. Jones was admittedly close to the microphone; Wise could have slipped in through the side door. According to his brother, he is a good impersonator: it was needed for the squeaky tones of the Mad Hatter and the telephone calls to the *Applestock Gazette* that he should dissemble his voice.

"Second, the duckings. Wise was in the water: he was one of the first to reach Sally after she'd gone under the second time. To divert any possible suspicion, he pretended later to have been ducked himself. Meanwhile the woman Jones posts up the Mad Hatter notice at the same time as the ordinary routine notices.

"Third, the two treacle episodes. Wise and Jones do not take their meals with the residents. They had the best opportunity for slipping, unnoticed or at least unchallenged, into the sports pavilion and the concert hall. At this point I must interpolate a reference to Wise's refusal at the games committee to accept the suggestion that the residents should aid in the search for the Mad Hatter, and his subsequent reluctance to call in the police."

Nigel opened one eye, and shut it again.

"For so efficient an organiser, he seemed remarkably half-hearted at the start in the measures he took. Fourth comes the matter of Mr. Perry's questionnaire. Strange that Captain Wise should allow him to take it without even inquiring into his bona fides. Strange, unless he saw in the questionnaire a golden opportunity for keeping his finger, if I may so put it, on the pulse of the patient he was gradually poisoning. Remember Miss Jones's suggestion for an additional question, 'What single practical joke could you imagine playing which would most disorganise the life of the camp?' The accomplices hoped to gain some useful hints from the answers to that. The fact that Perry was allowed to see these answers might also be turned to advantage in the event of their wishing to make somebody a scapegoat.

"And Perry it was whom, later, they tried to implicate. Jones hints to you his interest in primitive initiation rites. Wise is conveniently at your side when you find the clue under Perry's chalet: if you had not found it, he would doubtless have contrived some method of making you find it. And it was he who called attention to the smell on the piece of wire."

"'Later,'" said Nigel. "That's the difficulty, isn't it? Why should they not implicate Perry at the start? Or alternatively, why should they try and throw the blame on anyone at that point, when nothing had happened to incriminate themselves? Or had it? Have you an answer to that?"

"Not on the spur of the moment, sir," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite with dignity. "But answer there doubtless is. To proceed: the incident of the poisoned dog points in no special direction. Suffice it to say that here again the deed could have been done more safely by Wise or Jones than by any resident wandering unauthorised to Pets' Corner in the small hours. It profitably raises, however, the question of means: all the paraphernalia of the practical jokes—strychnine, treacle, fireworks, and the rest. Were the miscreant one of the visitors, there would be a real danger of these things being discovered in his chalet, by a maid or some other visitor. The chalets, indeed, were searched on one occasion, but none of these articles was found. How much easier for Wise and Jones to keep them concealed.

“Next we come to the macabre episode of the dead animals. I will only touch upon this lightly, contenting myself with pointing out that, though the man Wise was present throughout the cabaret show and in evidence at the interval, his accomplice, Jones, who was talking with Perry at the beginning of the interval, was called away to the telephone. From whom did that call come,” boomed Mr. Thistlethwaite impressively, “and did she, in fact, ever answer it? The question, in my view, is linked up significantly with that of motive. I will now proceed to deal with the question of motive in some detail. It is abundantly substantiated, in the first place, that——”

A sharp snore broke from Nigel, so sharp that it woke him up.

“You were saying, Mr. Thistlethwaite——?”

“It will keep, sir. No, pray do not apologise. It is I who should apologise, for my thoughtlessness in keeping you up after so arduous a day. I can only plead that I was absorbed: a romantic at heart, I have never before met with the romance of crime, except in the pages of detective fiction, and——”

“‘The romance of crime!’” Nigel suddenly exclaimed. “Oh, thank you for those words, dear Mr. Thistlethwaite! They’ve given me the clue—the key to the one lock that’s been defeating me. To-morrow, if you will, you shall repeat your theory to a select little audience. You shall help to unveil the Mad Hatter.”

PART III

Mr. Strangeways Takes Tea

XVII

THE NEXT MORNING, Friday, the weather broke. A dismal haar came up from the sea, shrouding the camp in its grey mist that damped the spirits and reminded many visitors of the dingy towns to which to-morrow they must return. There was, perhaps, a certain anti-climax, too, in the fact that last night the Mad Hatter had done nothing: nerves had been strung up to expect some new attack, and in the morning they still quivered—tired but unsatisfied. After breakfast the residents wandered about rather aimlessly. The finals of the various tournaments—tennis, bowls, clock-golf—should have been taking place this morning, but the thick mist would render most of them impossible. Yet it seemed a cruel waste of the last day of vacation to spend it indoors.

This, together with a certain physical uneasiness—a kind of claustrophobia—created by the enveloping fog, bred dissatisfaction amongst the residents. A deputation from the sports committee, headed by the formidable Miss Gardiner, approached Captain Wise and asked what progress had been made in the Mad Hatter investigation. The manager turned them over to Nigel, who told them that he had the case well in hand.

"Now, young man," commented Miss Gardiner, "you can't put me off with that kind of eyewash. We represent the visitors, and we have a right to know what's being done. Have you, or have you not, found out the truth?"

"Yes. I have found out the truth."

"Well, then——"

"Do you, or do you not, want a scandal in the camp, Miss Gardiner?" said Nigel, matching her pedagogue's aggressiveness with a manner even more magisterial. The deputation glanced uncertainly at each other. Only Miss Gardiner remained four-square for the truth.

"You mean, I take it, that the management wants you to hush the whole thing up?"

"The position is a little difficult, Miss Gardiner. If we publish the name of the culprit, he might receive very rough handling from the visitors; as you say, they're worked up this morning. On the other hand, apart from the poisoning of the dog, there's no charge we could bring against him in court. He has not done any damage. The duckings scarcely amount to an assault in the legal sense."

"But this is outrageous. Is he to get off scot-free?"

Nigel delicately placed a finger on Miss Gardiner's weakness, saying:

"Under ordinary circumstances, no. But, as an expert psychologist, I know you will agree with me that certain delinquencies are best treated by psychotherapy rather than by disciplinary measures."

The schoolmistress gave him a gratified smile and a look of ponderous complicity.

"Of course. I understand. Yes, that alters the whole case. I see, Mr. Strangeways, that it can safely be left in your hands."

With a curt nod to the other members of the deputation, a nod that silenced any protests they might have wished to make, she ushered them away as if dismissing a class.

Nigel told Captain Wise he had got rid of her. "But how long they'll keep quiet, I can't guarantee," he said. "I was thinking of getting together this afternoon the

people concerned, and giving a report on the case. Perhaps I'd better ask Miss Gardiner to attend, too. Only, it'll be rather a squash in my chalet."

"Why not use my sitting-room?" Captain Wise suggested. "What time would suit you?"

"Shall we say four o'clock? I should have cleared up the various odds and ends by then, and it wouldn't interfere with the normal camp programme. The others will be at tea."

"Very well. And I'll arrange for tea to be brought up here. How many will be coming?"

"Perry—the doctor says he can get about this afternoon: Mr. Thistlethwaite and Sally; Albert Morley; Miss Gardiner; your brother. That makes nine, including us two and Miss Jones."

"And the Mad Hatter is one of these?"

"We'll have to decide upon that when I've made my report."

Nigel spent the rest of the morning interviewing certain of the visitors and the Wonderland staff. Had he wished any of his movements to be unobserved, he could not have asked a better day for it. The fog, swirling over the camp in swathe after swathe, though there seemed to be no wind to account for its mobility, blanketed the buildings and kept most of the residents indoors. The few he met peered cautiously at him till they were certain of his identity: it was evident that they were on edge, fearing the fog as a stalking-ground for the Mad Hatter. Even indoors, playing at the pin-tables, at darts, billiards, or whatever recreation took its fancy, Wonderland was strangely subdued. The nervous strain of the last week, with all its queer tricks, rumours and apprehensions, had stretched nerves tauter than most realised. There was a feeling about—it coiled insidiously like the clammy sea-mist into every corner of the camp—that on this, the last full day of the holiday week, the Mad Hatter would perpetrate some crowning deed of malice. This feeling was heightened by the mystery of Captain Wise and Paul Perry, for the visitors had not been told the story of yesterday's events. Captain Wise for his part, declaring that it would cause real panic in the camp if it were known that the practical joker had turned to shooting, insisted on the matter being hushed up: while certain very high Authorities, who had been in touch with Nigel and the local police by telephone, were equally insistent that the death of "Mr. Charles Black" should receive no publicity at all.

At lunch-time Nigel was in Applestock, conferring with the Naval Intelligence and the Chief Constable. At an identity parade he was able to pick out the man who had passed the "betting-slip" to the spy. Later, he visited a poky, smelly little shop in the old quarter of the town. The police car returned him to Wonderland at half-past three …

At four o'clock they were filing through the manager's office into his sitting-room. There was a certain self-consciousness evident in most of them as they sat down at the table, already laid for tea, as if they were about to play a round game whose rules they did not know. Captain Wise indicated that Miss Gardiner, the oldest lady present, should sit at the head of the table: Nigel was given the other end, his back to the balcony window. When they were all seated, he took a quick look round.

On his left was Paul Perry, his arm in a sling, pale and a little uneasy, but with that faint, underlying expression of triumph still perceptible. Beside him, radiant and protective, a grey-eyed Athene, was Sally Thistlethwaite. Next to Sally sat Teddy Wise, his magnificent body in its green Wonderland jersey almost blotting out Albert Morley beyond. On the other side of Miss Gardiner, who was putting on her pince-nez with a judicial gesture, Captain Wise sat: he had the relaxed expression of one

who had handed over a responsibility. Next to him was Miss Jones, and between her and Nigel was stationed the attentive bulk of Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"I wonder would you mind changing places with Mr. Thistlethwaite?" said Nigel to Miss Jones. "It will be more convenient if I want you to take any notes."

Mr. Thistlethwaite arose, handed her to his chair with a courtly gesture, and sat down in her place, carefully hitching up one trouser-leg and placing it over the other, momentarily the image of an Edwardian roué about to take an apéritif at Biarritz. He wore for this momentous occasion a cream-coloured flannel suit and a carnation in his buttonhole.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," said Nigel, "by Captain Wise's kind permission you've been asked here to listen to my report on the Mad Hatter business. In one way or another each of you has been closely involved with it, so it's only fair that you should be the first—perhaps it will be the only—people to know the real truth about it."

"Hear, hear!" barked Miss Gardiner.

"It has been a peculiarly difficult case for us to solve, not because there was any unusual subtlety behind the outrages or because the motive for them was far to seek, but because of the irrelevances that crept in and the impossibility under the circumstances of collating alibis. One of the irrelevances was the affair that has led to Perry's having his arm in a sling: those who know the facts of that affair have been sworn to silence, and I am not allowed to say anything more about it than that it has no reference to the business of this afternoon."

There was a marked stir, and mystified glances were exchanged by several of the company. Miss Gardiner drew herself up, as if to deliver a reprimand, but catching a cool look from Nigel she subsided again.

"The other irrelevance I shall come to in a minute," he went on. "As I say, owing to the great number of visitors here and the informal way in which they turn up to meals, wander in and out and around, and so on, it would have been impossible to establish alibis for most of the occasions when the Mad Hatter was laying his little snares. Besides this, Captain Wise was prevented from conducting really stringent inquiries in the earlier part of the week by his natural fear of upsetting his guests. It was out of the question for me to examine the alibis of each of these four hundred or so people for several different occasions, since the important thing was to catch up with the Mad Hatter *quickly*. I had to adopt other methods. I looked first for motive. There were several possible motives. First, that X was a practical joker just for the fun of the thing: second, that he was a case of split personality: third, that he had some reason for destroying the reputation of Wonderland: fourth, that he had launched a series of practical jokes as a smokescreen for a more serious attack upon some single individual.

"The first motive could be dismissed fairly soon. A practical joker pure and simple would not persist in his tricks when he realised how violently public opinion had turned against him: nor is it likely that he would have communicated his campaign step by step to the Press. The fourth motive also is put out of court, by the simple fact that no serious attack *has* been made upon anyone here."

"Oy, oy!" protested Teddy Wise. "If one of the little chaps may interrupt—what about the bullet that just missed imbedding itself in my brother's bulging brain?"

"That brings me to the second irrelevance I mentioned."

"It wasn't so irrelevant for me," said Captain Wise, stroking his bandaged ear.

"Irrelevance?" said Esmeralda Jones. "Do you mean it wasn't the Mad Hatter who shot Captain Wise?"

Nigel glanced blandly round the table. “Captain Wise,” he announced, “was of course shot by Albert Morley.”

The sensation was terrific. Miss Gardiner leapt in her seat and took up a knife, as if to defend herself against the rosy-faced, chubby little killer who sat next her. Sally looked as if she would like to take a knife to Nigel. Captain Wise stared at his alleged assailant with incredulity. Paul Perry jerked round to look at Albert, hurt his wounded arm and drew in his breath sharply. Even Miss Jones’s impassive mannequin’s face showed emotion. As for Albert himself, his mouth fell open and he froze quite still like a small animal trying to evade notice. At last Teddy Wise exclaimed, with a not very convincing jocularity:

“Oh, Albert, you naughty little man! Hey, wait a minute, though! You’ve drawn the wrong number, Strangeways. Albert couldn’t have done that. He’s a hopeless shot. He couldn’t hit a haystack.”

“Albert hit Captain Wise *because* he was such a bad shot,” replied Nigel, whom an Oxford education had imbued with regrettable leanings towards the paradox.

“Give me air!” exclaimed Teddy.

“I think you’re talking boloney,” said Sally.

“Albert was the only person to be found near the scene of the crime,” Nigel continued. “He walked out to meet me from a clump of trees beyond the shooting-gallery. Now Albert has many admirable qualities; but they do not include, I fancy, the kind of nerve to carry off a bluff like that—supposing he had really intended to kill Captain Wise. The fact is that, as I might have gathered at once from the horror he showed when I told him that Captain Wise had been shot, he had no intention to hit him at all. I was faced with this contradiction: the only person who, geographically speaking, could have fired the shot, was such a bad shot that it was a thousand to one against his hitting the target. I left that aside, and asked myself why should Albert have fired at all. Mr. Thistlethwaite ingeniously suggested that he’d mistaken Captain Wise for his brother, against whom he might reasonably have a certain ill feeling. But the impromptu nature of the crime, together with Albert’s knowledge that he was a hopeless marksman, put this suggestion out of the running.

“I approached the question from another angle. I had heard from Sally that she’d told Albert how Perry was worrying himself to death believing he might be the Mad Hatter—or was suspected of being. Albert would do anything for Sally. Albert knew that Perry was going for a long walk yesterday. That was the set-up. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite, in another context, used the phrase ‘the romance of crime,’ and I saw in a flash the one explanation that would account for everything. Albert Morley is an incorrigible romantic. He has been brooding about how to take this load of anxiety off Sally’s mind and Paul’s. He happens to be by the shooting-gallery when Captain Wise appears up on the balcony. Albert says to himself in a twinkling, ‘If I fire up at the balcony, the shot will be assumed to come from the Mad Hatter. Paul is away from camp on a long walk. Therefore the shot will prove that he is *not* the Mad Hatter. Q. E. D.’

“Mind you, anyone might have argued in those terms, but only a hardened romantic would have acted on them. I should add that Albert, having been given an alibi by Mr. Thistlethwaite for the dead-animals joke, believed that he was quite safe —shot or no shot—from being suspected of the Mad Hatter outrages. Anyway, he ups and fires, meaning the bullet to whiz harmlessly and at a respectful distance past Captain Wise’s head. But his excitement aggravates his fault of jerking at the trigger instead of squeezing it, the muzzle is jerked to the right, and the bullet takes a chip out of our resident manager. That’s so, isn’t it, Albert?”

"I—yes, I'm afraid it is. It was awfully stupid of me, I'm afraid," Albert Morley stammered. He added, with ludicrous formality, "I must take this opportunity, Captain Wise, of expressing my deepest regrets. I——"

"That's all right, Morley. No bones broken." The manager turned to Nigel. "So we're back where we started?"

"Yes. In a sense. Perry has not got the alibi which Albert tried to give him, and Mr. Thistlethwaite told me last night that Albert's own alibi for the dead-animals stunt has a hole in it. So we all start from scratch again."

Sally's face was white with indignation. But she had been told that no word of Paul's experience yesterday must get out; so, biting her lip, she refrained from speech.

Nigel now gave a brief outline of the case, on the same lines as the one he had given to Mr. Thistlethwaite last night. When he had finished, he said:

"There are the facts. We now come to theory."

"Just a minute, Mr. Strangeways," said Miss Gardiner, in a voice a little louder than she generally used. "Let me get this clear. What is your object in having us all to listen to this? Am I to assume that, amongst those sitting round the table, is the Mad Hatter himself?"

A knock at the door made everyone start. It rapped on nerves suddenly tautened by Miss Gardiner's question. But the person who entered was only an attendant bringing in the trays of tea-things. Putting them down on the sideboard, she retired.

"Ah, tea," said Nigel, rubbing his hands together. "It'll make a nice break. Between the fact and the theory," he intoned, in the manner of a young lady from a school of elocution rendering one of Mr. Eliot's choruses, "comes the cucumber sandwich."

There was a general movement and polite jostling as the men helped to place the tea-things on the table. There were plates of sandwiches, some covered dishes, and two teapots.

"Your chef has done us proud," said Nigel, beaming at the array of food.

Miss Gardiner appeared to be having some difficulty with the first teapot.

"It won't pour," she said; and, lifting the lid, peered inside. The next moment, with a curious little scream, she banged the teapot down on the table again and jumped on to her chair. Everyone stared at her. Pince-nez awry, cheeks puffed out, she pointed dumbly towards the teapot. A scrabbling noise came from it; and presently a sizeable white mouse poked its head out, quivered its whiskers, looked round nervously at the company, and withdrew again from sight.

There was a moment's complete silence. Then Miss Jones, with a shaky laugh, exclaimed:

"God! It's the dormouse! The dormouse they put into the teapot! This is the Mad Hatter's tea party."

Captain Wise sprang towards the door that led into his office. The door was locked.

"Who the devil?—I'll go out on the balcony and see if there's anyone below. This is outrageous."

"Just a minute, Captain Wise," said Nigel. "There's no special hurry. Let's all sit down and see what this adds up to. Allow me." He decanted the mouse out of the teapot, seized it and placed it outside on the balcony. Miss Gardiner descended from her chair with considerably less agility than she had mounted it. Albert Morley, helping her down, remarked:

"There was no cause for alarm. It was a tame mouse. I used to keep white ones

like that when I was a boy."

"I am not interested, Morley, whether you kept white mice or white elephants," the schoolmistress replied in rasping tones. "One thing is perfectly clear, that this specious detective has been duped again. The Mad Hatter is *not* in this room——"

"Why should you assume that he was?" asked Nigel mildly.

"He has made a complete fool of us. It's the most humiliating position to be in—I will not tolerate it—let me out."

"Now, now, now. The only way you can get out is to jump off the balcony. Let's all keep cool."

"I suggest we should go on with our tea. Ha! Muffins, I fancy," said Mr. Thistlethwaite: and, suiting the action to the word, lifted the cover from one of the dishes. It was not muffins. It was a small, forked piece of wood.

"What on earth is this?" he asked, gingerly taking it out. "A catapult?"

"Great Scot!" exclaimed Captain Wise. "The rocket stick!"

"*Mortimer!*" Miss Jones's voice cut through the clamour like a whip. Everyone turned to her. "He must have—quick, what's in the other dishes?"

There was a moment of hesitation. It seemed that no one wanted to lift off the covers. Then Paul Perry, pushing back the lock of hair that fell over his forehead, said:

"Well, I'll try the next surprise-packet."

He raised a lid. Beneath it lay the body of a dead thrush.

"Oh, this is horrible!" Sally hid her face in her hands. Soon the remaining covered dishes were exposed, revealing severally a small bottle labelled "Strychnine," two halves of a tennis ball filled with treacle, and a .22 bullet embedded in a piece of cotton wool.

"Well now, this is most interesting," declared Nigel. "The case is certainly beginning to look up. Our practical joker is a symbolist. But surely there's something missing? Yes, the duckings. That was the one joke he couldn't put under a lid, so to speak. Unless——" he giggled—"I say, What's in that other teapot?"

Teddy Wise went over to the sideboard and fetched it. "Doesn't look like tea," he said. He put his finger inside, licked it cautiously, and exclaimed: "Christmas! It's salt water!"

"Ah! That rounds it off. Splendid!" said Nigel, taking another sandwich. It was too much for Captain Wise, who burst out irritably:

"Look here, Strangeways. The thing's preposterous. The fellow must have bribed that waitress to bring all this stuff in, and lock the door on us. We've only got to break out and get hold of her, and I'll soon find out who the chap is."

"Get hold of her? Did you notice her face? Your back was turned. Did anyone pay attention to her?"

No one, it turned out, had done so.

"Gosh!" said Sally. "Was she the Mad Hatter in disguise?"

"We're all being slightly ridiculous," Miss Jones said tartly. "Tea was ordered for ten minutes ago. If that waitress was the Mad Hatter in disguise, where's the real one that should have been sent up from the kitchen? Were these dishes substituted on the way? How——"

"Perhaps the proper waitress was intercepted on her way here, and dealt with," suggested Mr. Thistlethwaite in blood-curdling tones.

"Now, we mustn't let ourselves get rattled like this," said Nigel. "There's quite a simple explanation for all these death's-heads at the banquet. Let's go back to the point at which we left off. I gave you a statement of the case. Before I offer my own

interpretation of it, I should like to hear any theories you may have. You can speak without prejudice, as the lawyers say, because nothing that is said need go beyond this room."

"This is most irregular," declared Miss Gardiner.

"Are you asking us to say who we think the Mad Hatter is?" asked Teddy Wise.

"Yes. From the facts I've given you, it ought to be apparent."

The joke which had just been played on them, after the first nervous shock was over, seemed to create a kind of irresponsibility among them. Tension was relaxed, for the grotesque objects that lay in the dishes before them made the whole atmosphere unreal. The tacit assumption was that this joke could only have been played by someone outside the room, and thus to accuse anyone inside it became a harmless and academic matter.

Miss Gardiner repeated her lecture on the psychology of the practical joker, and pointed out how well it fitted the character of Albert Morley. Captain Wise, indicating the clues which seemed to incriminate Paul Perry, said apologetically that he had suspected Paul of the outrages for some time. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite arose and unfolded the case against Captain Wise and Miss Jones, as he had put it last night to Nigel.

"… And now," he said at last, "I come to the question of motive. Why should these two, whose fortunes might seem to stand or fall with those of Wonderland, kill —if I may so express it—the goose that laid the golden eggs? The answer is that the eggs were not big enough. Miss Jones, the daughter of a millionaire, accustomed to a life of idle luxury, finds herself working for her living on the pittance of a secretary. Captain Wise, whose salary we have been told by several people is by no means commensurate with his abilities or ambitions, and is certainly not adequate to the running of a Lagonda, the purchase of the gold wrist-watches, cigarette cases and other trinkets that he sports——"

"Really, Mr. Strangeways," exclaimed Esmeralda Jones icily, "aren't you letting this go too far? It's in abominably bad taste."

"So were the practical jokes, Miss Jones. Don't forget that."

The atmosphere in the room, which had been imperceptibly growing more tense, shedding little by little its unreality, was now taut to breaking point. Nigel's tone, as he made this last remark, brought up every head with a jerk. All their eyes turned on Miss Jones. Bold chin lifted, red lips curling disdainfully, she stared back at Nigel. She did not give an inch. Captain Wise's fingers drummed on the table: he looked strangely ineffectual and shrunken, out of his depth altogether.

"The motive," said Nigel, "is as Mr. Thistlethwaite has stated. Captain Wise, I learnt, ran through a considerable legacy a few years ago. He does run through money; and so does Miss Jones. Several of us have noticed that he lives more expensively than his salary warrants: but, his brother told me, he has no private means."

"Strangeways, this is the grossest impertinence. I——"

"So here we have this ambitious, luxury-loving couple, perhaps already in debt, certainly on the look-out for some way of bettering themselves. At this point a Mr. Leyman comes into the picture. He is the man behind the big holiday-camps company that runs the place at Beale and is Wonderland's chief rival. Miss Arnold told me that she had seen Leyman talking to Captain Wise and Miss Jones in a London restaurant some months before. Now there was nothing necessarily suspicious about that. But, when I mentioned it to Miss Jones, she at once volunteered a great deal of information about Leyman. She had known him in her

palmier days, she said; and, when things went wrong, he tried to take advantage of her unfortunate position. This again may have been true: though I cannot easily imagine her hobnobbing in a restaurant with a man who had shown up in that light. But why should she give me this information at all? There was no need for it, *unless she had to divert my attention from some different relationship between her and Leyman*. That relationship, I suggest, was our dear old friend, the cash-nexus. Leyman had agreed to set up Jones and Wise for life, if they in return smashed the company which was his chief rival."

"For sheer fantasy," said Miss Jones, "this beats the Mad Hatter every time. Does anyone here really imagine that respectable business companies conduct themselves like the villains in a pantomime?"

"Of course they do. If they can't get what they want in any other way. Look at the bribery and cloak-and-dagger stuff that goes on in the armament trade. Look at the methods some big newspaper-owners have adopted to push old-established provincial papers out of competition. Oh, no, there's nothing fantastic about the motive. The fantastic method of operations that was adopted is quite another matter. I attribute it to Miss Jones, who has great intelligence and a highly-developed sense of mischief. She was the comic genius behind the Mad Hatter: I think she was also the moving spirit behind the whole affair—I doubt if Captain Wise would have undertaken it without her prompting. But, like many intelligent criminals, she overreached herself."

"I've listened patiently to this—this rigmarole of yours, Strangeways. I can only say that, if anyone has overreached himself, it's you. I must advise you to be very careful how——"

"Mr. Thistlethwaite pointed out that, of all the people in the camp, the manager and his secretary had by far the best opportunity for carrying out the practical jokes," Nigel continued imperturbably. "They knew the terrain, they knew where the sentries were posted, they could keep the materials for the jokes safely hidden; above all, they were the only pair of people in the camp who could be imagined as working together over the jokes, and the business of the duckings and the Mad Hatter's notice that was pinned up at the same time strongly suggested, the work of accomplices.

"So we come to the Mad Hatter's tea party, his last laugh. It was intended, of course, to prove that the Mad Hatter could not be any of those present. But it was when they overreached themselves most disastrously. For it's quite evident that no one but these two could possibly have organised the tea party. It was Captain Wise's suggestion that we should have tea, in the first place. His staff are devoted to him; the waitress, who brought in the tea and no doubt substituted these sinister oddments for the cakes she was supposed to bring in, would never give him away. He may even have told her that it was part of a trap to catch the Mad Hatter. And it did catch him, which was the last thing he intended. You're all reasonable people. Can any of you imagine how this last trick could have been managed by anyone but Captain Wise and Miss Jones?"

Silence gave the answer. Besides, several of those at the table had noticed angry, baffled, questioning glances passing between the two. At last Miss Jones spoke, in a high, furious voice.

"You haven't brought forward an atom of proof for your ridiculous theory. And as for this tea party, which you pretend——"

"I haven't brought forward an atom of proof?" Nigel's voice slashed across hers and quelled it. "Very well. I will now, as you're asking for it. Your accomplice tripped up badly over this tea party. He tripped up on a piece of wood."

Nigel suddenly reached forward and picked up the forked stick out of the dish. He held it aloft. He asked:

"Did anyone notice something odd about this?"

To everyone's surprise it was Albert Morley who broke the puzzled silence, bobbing his head, blushing, saying timidly:

"Well, I did think it rather queer that Captain Wise should have called it a rocket stick. I mean, it isn't one, is it?"

"*Exactly!* But a stick like this was used to support and aim the rocket that was fired over the head of the crowd in the avenue that night. As soon as I'd found it—and I arrived first on the scene, remember—I put the stick in my pocket. I told *no one* about its existence, It follows therefore that no one but the person who fired the rocket could have recognised this fork of wood. Miss Jones realised just now how her accomplice had given the whole thing away by that slip of the tongue: she cried out 'Mortimer!'; then she tried to pass it off, but it was too late. Captain Wise, have you any answer to that?"

Everyone was staring at the manager. His hands fluttered, he tried to speak, but the answer was already written on his face.

XVIII

TRAVELLING BACK TO London next morning, in the same compartment as Nigel Strangeways and the Thistlethwaites, Paul Perry allowed his mind to wander idly over that extraordinary tea party. He felt a delicious languor stealing across his senses—Sally's shoulder was pressed confidingly against his—yet his mind was clear and alert. Strangeways, he had to admit, though a bit too much the frivolous Oxford type, had done well. There was something about him which had reduced to impotence even the efficient Captain Wise and the brilliant Esmeralda Jones. Yes, somehow or other he had made Miss Jones look foolish, had turned the opinion of the meeting against her.

Even after the collapse of her accomplice she had held her ground. Paul could still see her vivid, angry, disdainful expression as she said: "You know perfectly well you have no real proof. You can do nothing."

For a moment it had seemed as if she would win yet. Then Strangeways had said, in that cold, unruffled, analytic voice of his, which made you feel that some abstract problem was being weighed up with the accuracy of a scientific instrument:

"Proof in the strict legal sense I have none. But everyone at this table believes that I am right—yes, even Captain Wise's brother has to admit it." Teddy Wise, avoiding his brother's eye, nodded despondently. "I shall write down a full account of this case and this afternoon's proceedings. This report will be signed by all those present except Miss Jones and Captain Wise. If Captain Wise will agree to write a confession of his responsibility for the Mad Hatter outrages, I shall proceed no further with the matter, except to ensure that neither of the accomplices profits out of their association with this Mr. Leyman. If, on the other hand, Captain Wise, you refuse to sign a confession, I shall send in my report to your directors as well as to my uncle. Provided, of course, that you all agree this is the best course of action."

The meeting agreed without a murmur. The combination of Nigel's quiet, reasonable voice and compelling eye. was enough for them. They were bewildered still; they wanted a lead, and they got it. Paul admired the neat way in which Nigel had thrust a wedge between the accomplices. He had done it physically, too; for the huge form of Mr. Thistlethwaite, interposed between Captain Wise and Miss Jones, insulated the manager from the current of resistance that still flowed strongly through his partner. He was the weak end of their axis, and it was upon him that Nigel had skilfully brought all the pressure to bear.

"Pull yourself together, Mortimer," said Miss Jones fiercely. "He hasn't a leg to stand on and he knows it. He's faked up this phoney case against us simply because he couldn't discover the real culprit. Let him send in his damned report if he likes. No one will believe it. I could pull it to pieces in a minute."

But her vibrant voice lost urgency: she was made slightly ridiculous by having to talk round Mr. Thistlethwaite. Nigel said:

"You must make up your own mind, Captain Wise. Unless you wish to remain under this young lady's thumb for the rest of your life."

Captain Wise raised his head; looked at the cold, embarrassed faces all round him. His own face, that had seemed capable, easy-going, amiable, now looked simply weak. He was sick of it all, evidently—sick of being constantly spurred on, as if by a too potent drug, by an ambition and vitality so much greater than his own. Running

his hand through his thin hair, he said:

"Oh, very well. I'll do what you say."

Esmeralda Jones sprang to her feet. For an instant Nigel feared she was going to fling herself at her lover.

"You're contemptible, Mortimer. Abject and contemptible. Beaten by a little bluff. I hope to God I never see you again."

She strode to the door, forgetting it was locked. In anger, her beauty and dignity were so great that even the locked door could not detract from them. She stood against the door, quite still, facing them all with a level gaze as Captain Wise wrote his confession.

When it was signed, Nigel said to him more kindly:

"You did your best to ruin the camp. Now you'll have the job of setting it on its feet again. I think we all can wish you luck …"

Now, glancing covertly at Nigel Who was immersed in the short stories of Tchekov, Paul Perry thought of something which had been puzzling him off and on ever since yesterday's tea party.

"I say. That forked piece of wood—well, it got him in a cleft stick—but wasn't it frightfully stupid of them to use it as one of the Mad Hatter symbols? They couldn't have put a whole rocket in the dish, but surely they might have managed something else to convey the rocket episode."

Nigel put the book down on his lap. A quizzical light appeared in his pale blue eyes.

"I wondered when somebody would think of that."

Mr. Thistlethwaite raised an impressive forefinger. "The whole tea party was a grave error on their part. Vaulting ambition, I have always found, doth o'erleap itself. Were I a criminal, my motto would be 'Leave well alone.'"

"Yes," said Nigel. "They weren't as stupid as all that, though. Give credit where credit's due. It was *my* tea party."

Sally gasped. "You mean, you arranged for all those horrible things to be put in the dishes? And the dormouse in the teapot?"

"It wasn't a dormouse, actually. I couldn't get one. I had to buy a tame mouse in Applestock."

They all gazed at him, in silent awe. Finally Sally managed to speak:

"Really, my pet, couldn't you have warned us?"

"Sally," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite, "you shouldn't call gentlemen your pet in a railway carriage."

"I think he's sweet," said Sally. "But he might have told us. I nearly passed away when that dead thrush appeared."

"Had we not all been genuinely surprised, the miscreants would have smelt a rat. Shock tactics, to be efficacious, depend on absolute secrecy."

"Just so, Mr. Thistlethwaite. I can tell you, none of you suffered like I did at that tea party. The whole thing was a monstrous bluff, and just about as flimsy as a balloon. But as Miss Jones far too clearly saw, I had no real proof at all. So I had to get Captain Wise rattled somehow or other. But I never expected he'd give himself away like that over the forked stick. I felt as if I'd bowled him out with a long hop."

"But how did you manage it at all? Was that waitress a plain-clothes woman in disguise?" Paul asked.

"No. She's a bona-fide waitress all right. I enlisted her aid in the morning. Told her I wanted her help to expose the Mad Hatter. Swore her to secrecy. Then, just before the tea party, I gave her the various things to put in the teapots and dishes,

and told her to lock the door behind `her when she went out. That door had to be locked, otherwise the astute Esmeralda would have made a bee-line for the servants' quarters and wrung the truth out of the waitress. Luckily, Captain Wise had suggested giving us tea—I fixed the meeting for a time when he couldn't very well have avoided doing so."

"But do you mean to say you arranged all that elaborate stunt just on the chance that it would make Captain Wise give himself away?" Paul inquired, with a trace of his old, aggressive, I-only-want-to-know manner. Then, feeling Sally's hand against his, he added more restrainedly, "It does seem a bit of a gamble."

"It was. But I'd never have got past their guard any other way. If it had been a straight criminal case, with the police in on it, we could have worked by less spectacular and much sounder methods—traced purchases of strychnine, treacle, fireworks; investigated every alibi; perhaps even uncovered more of the association between Leyman and my two suspects. But who was I amongst so many? That kind of routine investigation was out of the question. Besides, I had to work quickly: Wise was going to pay me off to-day, I have no doubt. And then you wasted a lot of my time holding shooting-matches with enemy aliens."

"Ouch! That's my bad arm, Sally!" Paul exclaimed.

"Darling, I'm sorry. I go all queer and clutch people for support when that dreadful man is mentioned."

"De mortuis, my dear, de mortuis," reproved her father. "Though it was on behalf of an undemocratic régime, we must allow that the man was but doing his duty."

"Had Strangeways coached you in that exposure you made, Mr. Thistlethwaite?" Paul asked presently. "Or was it your own unaided work?"

"Mr. Strangeways' mind and mine, sir, proceeded along very similar lines. I was only repeating a theory of the case which I had already propounded to him," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite with dignity. He turned to Nigel. "In the hurly-burly of the last few days, I did not have all the opportunities for conversation with you that I could have wished. I should esteem it a privilege, sir, if you would enlighten me on two points. How did you first come to suspect the manager and his secretary? And what was it you meant when you told me to pay special attention to the *time* when the clues apparently incriminating Mr. Perry first appeared?"

"I think it was the odd way that Wise behaved with Miss Jones that drew my attention to them. She was obviously a very confidential secretary: yet, during my first interview with them, he twice ticked her off as if she was a mere incompetent stenographer. Captain Wise was normally a polite, considerate man: so his treatment of Miss Jones on this occasion seemed out of character. It was, of course, a clumsy attempt to impress upon me that his relationship with her was no more than the usual employer-employee one. He may be good at impersonations, but he's pretty amateurish as an actor: his effects were much too crude."

"I noticed his up and down behaviour with Miss Jones, too," said Paul. "I thought it was because he was the weaker character and had to assert himself now and then."

"There was something of that in it, too. You yourself, by the way, gave me an idea early on. You asked me what sort of people I got as clients—whether they were people afraid to call in the police. It was a bit odd, after all, that the management hadn't called them in. I know Captain Wise kept saying he mustn't do anything to upset the residents——"

"We'd all much rather have had the police in than feel the Mad Hatter was still at large and nothing being done about it," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite.

"Exactly. That's just what I thought. And it would have absolved Wise from

responsibility in the eyes of his directors. There were other little points that made me suspicious of him. For instance, when the story of the outrages began to appear in the Press, he affected to be wild with rage. Yet he refused to speak to the *Applestock Gazette* over the phone—told me to handle the matter. Rather a volte-face, considering that a minute before he'd been breathing fire and brimstone against them: but understandable on the theory that it was he who had supplied them with the information and was afraid, though he'd spoken to them in a disguised voice, lest they should recognise his ordinary one through the context.

"I set a little dilemma for him on those lines the day before yesterday. I rang up the *Gazette* and told them to call me back at once if the Mad Hatter got on to them about the latest practical joke. I informed Wise what I had done. This put him in a quandary. He wouldn't dare communicate the latest story to the *Gazette* now, for he knew I'd go to the public box, and, finding no one there, would suspect the Mad Hatter call of coming from the phone in his office. So the Mad Hatter kept mum that day. But only the *Gazette*, the manager, and I, knew of this little plan. Unless the manager *was* the Mad Hatter, why was the *Gazette* not informed of the latest outrage in the usual way?"

"Devilish smart, sir! Capital!" applauded Mr. Thistlethwaite with vast enthusiasm.

"But the most conclusive piece of evidence against these two was the point Mr. Thistlethwaite asked about just now. At a certain stage in the series of outrages, clues began to be laid incriminating Paul Perry. If the Mad Hatter had wished to divert suspicion from himself by casting it on someone else, why did he not do so from the start? The only answer was, something must have happened recently to threaten his sense of security. Consider for a moment the order of events. The warning over the loud-speakers, the duckings, the two treacle episodes, the poisoning of the dog, the treasure-hunt and the false alarm about Phyllis Arnold's injuries, the dead-animals incident. It was not till this last occurred that any tangible clue turned up—the piece of wire underneath Paul's chalet. Now it was arguable, of course, that here I had found a perfectly genuine clue; and Paul complicated matters by his own behaviour. But I could imagine no reasonable motive for him, unless he was indeed—as he suggested—a schizophrenic.

"But suppose the clue had been planted. What had happened recently to incriminate the real culprit? What about Miss Arnold's blisters? They had been caused by touching wild parsley. At this point we had not yet proved that the thing was an accident. But, if it was part of the practical jokes, it pointed exclusively to the Wises and Miss Jones, for it was they who had arranged the various hiding-places for the treasure-hunt clues. I deliberately kept Wise and Jones on tenterhooks about this as long as I could. The result was, *clues and hints against someone else were quickly forthcoming*. They chose Paul as victim because he had played into their hands (*a*) by starting the rumour about mustard-gas, and (*b*) by showing to Miss Jones an unseemly interest in initiation ceremonies which could be suggested as a sort of mad-scientist motive for the whole series of outrages.

"Esmeralda Jones was far too intelligent, of course, to lay incriminating clues against anyone else. It never pays. But, when the Phyllis Arnold affair developed and seemed to be pointing straight at the management, I fancy Wise panicked a bit and overruled her. It's a nice irony that they should have betrayed themselves so unnecessarily, over the one thing for which they knew they were not responsible. If they'd sat tight for a day longer, Doctor Holford and I would have been forced to give them evidence proving their own innocence in this particular affair: for we knew by then that Miss Arnold's idiosyncrasy for wild parsley had never manifested

itself before. But, as Mr. Thistlethwaite so justly pointed out, criminals will not 'leave well alone.'"

"A notable piece of ratiocination, sir," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "I confess the significance of that point had altogether escaped me. I wonder you did not promulgate it at the tea party."

"It may be convincing for criminologists like yourself. But it was not a good point for a jury. And it was a kind of jury I had to address then. Besides, Wise had already given himself away, so there was no need of it."

The train ripped through a landscape of meadows smooth and rich like golden watered silk, of elms and solid stone farmsteads. Already, to Paul, Wonderland was as remote as a childhood holiday, as fantastic as its own name. Only the touch of Sally's hand on his remained to assure him it had not all been a bad dream. Mr. Thistlethwaite, as if he had eaten a magic mushroom, was already turning back into the tailor of Oxford: the black tail coat, the sponge-bag trousers and butterfly collar which he had again assumed, together with a changed, subtle deference of manner, seemed to play tricks with time, so that the train might have been running backwards into the past, carrying them as it had done a week ago towards an unknown holiday. But then there had only been four occupants of their compartment. Paul turned to Nigel and said:

"I can scarcely believe it was all real. Those practical jokes, the kind of suppressed hysteria plus pleasure-as-usual atmosphere in the camp—well, they were nasty enough at the time, but they look hopelessly far-fetched to me now. I can't seem able to take them seriously."

"You've Esmeralda Jones to thank for that. She's got many admirable qualities; but she was a spoilt child, and spoilt children are apt to grow up irresponsible, and irresponsible adults—by not facing the seriousness of their own actions—do create a dream atmosphere that affects outsiders too. She's a throwback to the Bright Young Things. Nobody else would have thought out so fantastic a method of gaining the objective. Unfortunately, she has an intelligence quite equal to her ambition and her uncontrollable love of mischief, so the campaign became a really formidable one. But Leyman would probably have double-crossed them in the end, anyway. I'm sorry for her."

"I'm not," said Sally. "I'm sorry for Captain Wise, a little. Fancy having that woman treading on your heels all the time. I bet she'd have chucked him aside as soon as she'd got the money. I always said she was a gold-digger."

"Perhaps. But she was genuinely fond of him. As a girl, she had all the power that money can buy. Wise was a relic, a reminder of that kingdom. She bossed him, and by doing so kept an edge on her appetite for power. She——"

Like Alice, the train plunged into a tunnel. The darkness and clattering din stopped all conversation. Paul and Sally may have found another use for it, though.

MORE FROM VINTAGE CLASSIC CRIME

MARGERY ALLINGHAM
Mystery Mile
Police at the Funeral
Sweet Danger
Flowers for the Judge
The Case of the Late Pig
Dancers in Mourning
The Fashion in Shrouds
Traitor's Purse
Coroner's Pidgin
More Work for the Undertaker
The Tiger in the Smoke
The Beckoning Lady
Hide My Eyes
The China Governess
The Mind Readers
Cargo of Eagles

E.F. BENSON
The Blotting Book
The Luck of the Vails

NICHOLAS BLAKE
A Question of Proof
Thou Shell of Death
There's Trouble Brewing
The Beast must Die
The Smiler with the Knife
Malice in Wonderland
The Case of the Abominable Snowman
Minute for Murder
Head of a Traveller
The Dreadful Hollow
The Whisper in the Gloom
End of Chapter
The Widow's Cruise
The Worm of Death
The Sad Variety
The Morning After Death

EDMUND CRISPIN
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The Case of the Gilded Fly
Holy Disorders

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The Moving Toyshop
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GLADYS MITCHELL
Speedy Death
The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop
The Longer Bodies
The Saltmarsh Murders
Death and the Opera
The Devil at Saxon Wall
Dead Men's Morris
Come Away, Death
St Peter's Finger
Brazen tongue
Hangman's Curfew
When Last I Died
Laurels are Poison
Here Comes a Chopper
Death and the Maiden
Tom Brown's Body
Groaning Spinney
The Devil's Elbow
The Echoing Strangers
Watson's Choice
The Twenty-Third Man
Spotted Hemlock
My Bones Will Keep
Three Quick and Five Dead
Dance to your Daddy
A Hearse on May-Day
Late, Late in the Evening
Faults in the Structure
Nest of Vipers

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